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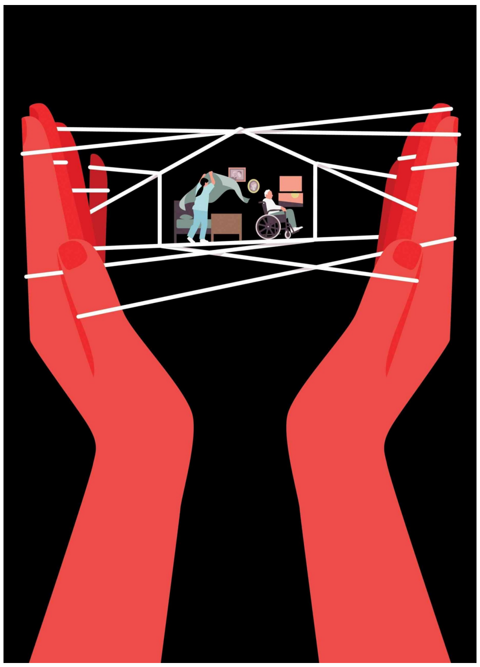
A Reporter at Large

- How Hospice Became a For-Profit Hustle

How Hospice Became a For-Profit Hustle

It began as a visionary notion—that patients could die with dignity at home. Now it's a twenty-two-billion-dollar industry plagued by exploitation.

By Ava Kofman



Over the years, Marsha Farmer had learned what to look for. As she drove the back roads of rural Alabama, she kept an eye out for dilapidated homes and trailers with wheelchair ramps. Some days, she'd ride the one-car ferry across the river to Lower Peach Tree and other secluded hamlets where a few houses lacked running water and bare soil was visible beneath the floorboards. Other times, she'd scan church prayer lists for the names of families with ailing members.

Farmer was selling hospice, which, strictly speaking, is for the dying. To qualify, patients must agree to forgo curative care and be certified by doctors as having less than six months to live. But at AseraCare, a national chain where Farmer worked, she solicited recruits regardless of whether they were near death. She canvassed birthday parties at housing projects and went door to door promoting the program to loggers and textile workers. She sent

colleagues to cadge rides on the Meals on Wheels van or to chat up veterans at the American Legion bar. "We'd find run-down places where people were more on the poverty line," she told me. "You're looking for uneducated people, if you will, because you're able to provide something to them and meet a need."

Farmer, who has doe eyes and a nonchalant smile, often wore scrubs on her sales routes, despite not having a medical background. That way, she said, "I would automatically be seen as a help." She tried not to mention death in her opening pitch, or even hospice if she could avoid it. Instead, she described an amazing government benefit that offered medications, nursing visits, nutritional supplements, and light housekeeping—all for free. "Why not try us just for a few days?" she'd ask families, glancing down at her watch as she'd been trained to do, to pressure them into a quick decision.

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Once a prospective patient expressed interest, a nurse would assess whether any of the person's conditions fit—or could be made to fit—a fatal prognosis. The Black Belt, a swath of the Deep South that includes parts of Alabama, has some of the highest rates of heart disease, diabetes, and emphysema in the country. On paper, Farmer knew, it was possible to finesse chronic symptoms, like shortness of breath, into proof of terminal decline.

When Farmer started out in the hospice business, in 2002, it felt less like a sales gig than like a calling. At thirty, she'd become a "community educator," or marketer, at Hospice South, a regional chain that had an office in her home town, Monroeville, Alabama. Monroeville was the kind of place where, if someone went into hospice, word got around and people sent baked goods. She often asked patients to write cards or make tape recordings for milestones—birthdays, anniversaries, weddings—that they might not live to see. She became an employee of the month and, within a year, was promoted to executive director of the branch, training a staff of her own to evangelize for end-of-life care.

Things began to change in 2004, when Hospice South was bought by Beverly Enterprises, the second-largest nursing-home chain in the country,

and got folded into one of its subsidiaries, AseraCare. Not long before the sale, Beverly had agreed to pay a five-million-dollar criminal fine and a hundred-and-seventy-five-million-dollar civil settlement after being accused of Medicare fraud. Its stock value had slumped, and Beverly's C.E.O. had decided that expanding its empire of hospices would help the company attract steadier revenue in "high-growth, high-margin areas of healthcare services." Less than two years later, as part of a wave of consolidations in the long-term-care industry, Beverly was sold to a private-equity firm, which rebranded it as Golden Living.

It might be counterintuitive to run an enterprise that is wholly dependent on clients who aren't long for this world, but companies in the hospice business can expect some of the biggest returns for the least amount of effort of any sector in American health care. Medicare pays providers a set rate per patient per day, regardless of how much help they deliver. Since most hospice care takes place at home and nurses aren't required to visit more than twice a month, it's not difficult to keep overhead low and to outsource the bulk of the labor to unpaid family members—assuming that willing family members are at hand.



"Spread out so it'll look like there are more of us."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

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Up to a point, the way Medicare has designed the hospice benefit rewards providers for recruiting patients who aren’t imminently dying. Long hospice stays translate into larger margins, and stable patients require fewer expensive medications and supplies than those in the final throes of illness.

Although two doctors must initially certify that a patient is terminally ill, she can be recertified as such again and again.

Almost immediately after the Asera-Care takeover, Farmer's supervisors set steep targets for the number of patients marketers had to sign up, and presented those who met admissions quotas with cash bonuses and perks, including popcorn machines and massage chairs. Employees who couldn't hit their numbers were fired. Farmer prided herself on being competitive and liked to say, "I can sell ice to an Eskimo." But as her remit expanded to include the management of AseraCare outposts in Foley and Mobile, she began to resent the demand to bring in more bodies. Before one meeting with her supervisor, Jeff Boling, she stayed up late crunching data on car wrecks, cancer, and heart disease to figure out how many people in her territories might be expected to die that year. When she showed Boling that the numbers didn't match what she called his "ungodly quotas," he was unmoved. "If you can't do it," she recalled him telling her, "we'll find someone who can."

Farmer's bigger problem was that her patients weren't dying fast enough. Some fished, drove tractors, and babysat grandchildren. Their longevity prompted concern around the office because of a complicated formula that governs the Medicare benefit. The federal government, recognizing that an individual patient might not die within the predicted six months, effectively demands repayment from hospices when the average length of stay of all patients exceeds six months.

But Farmer's company, like many of its competitors, had found ways to game the system and keep its money. One tactic was to "dump," or discharge, patients with overly long stays. The industry euphemism is "graduated" from hospice, though the patient experience is often more akin to getting expelled: losing diapers, pain medications, wheelchairs, nursing care, and a hospital-grade bed that a person might not otherwise be able to afford. In 2007, according to Farmer's calculations around the time, seventy per cent of the patients served by her Mobile office left hospice alive.

Another way to hold on to Medicare money was to consistently pad the roster with new patients. One day in 2008, facing the possibility of a repayment, AseraCare asked some of its executive directors to "get double

digit admits" and to "have the kind of day that will go down in the record books." A follow-up e-mail, just an hour later, urged staff to "go around the barriers and make this happen now, your families need you."

That summer, Boling pushed Farmer to lobby oncologists to turn over their "last breath" patients: those with only weeks or days to live. At the time, Farmer's fifty-nine-year-old mother was dying of metastatic colon cancer. Although Farmer knew that the service might do those last-breath people good, it enraged her that her hospice was chasing them cynically, to balance its books. The pressure was so relentless that sometimes she felt like choking someone, but she had two small children and couldn't quit. Her husband, who had been a co-worker at AseraCare, had already done so. Earlier that year, after fights with Boling and other supervisors about quotas, he had left for a lower-paying job, at Verizon.

Farmer's confidante at work, Dawn Richardson, shared her frustration. A gifted nurse who was, as Farmer put it, "as country as a turnip," Richardson hated admitting people who weren't appropriate or dumping patients who were. She was a single mom, though, and needed a paycheck. One evening in early 2009, the two happened upon another way out.

The local news was reporting that two nurses at SouthernCare, a prominent Alabama-based competitor, had accused the company of stealing taxpayer dollars by enrolling ineligible patients in hospice. SouthernCare, which admitted no wrongdoing, settled with the Justice Department for nearly twenty-five million dollars, and the nurses, as whistle-blowers, had received a share of the sum—$4.9 million, to be exact. Farmer and Richardson had long felt uneasy about what AseraCare asked them to do. Now, they realized, what they were doing might be illegal. They decided to call James Barger, a lawyer who had represented one of the SouthernCare nurses. That March, he helped Farmer and Richardson file a whistle-blower complaint against AseraCare and Golden Living in the Northern District of Alabama, accusing the company of Medicare fraud. The case would go on to become the most consequential lawsuit the hospice industry had ever faced.

The philosophy of hospice was imported to the United States in the nineteen-sixties by Dame Cicely Saunders, an English doctor and social worker who'd grown appalled by the "wretched habits of big, busy hospitals

where everyone tiptoes past the bed and the dying soon learn to pretend to be asleep.” Her counter-practice, which she refined at a Catholic clinic for the poor in East London, was to treat a dying patient’s “total pain”—his physical suffering, spiritual needs, and existential disquiet. In a pilot program, Saunders prescribed terminally ill patients cocktails of morphine, cocaine, and alcohol—whiskey, gin, or brandy, depending on which they preferred. Early results were striking. Before-and-after photos of cancer patients showed formerly anguished figures knitting scarves and raising toasts.

Saunders’s vision went mainstream in 1969, when the Swiss-born psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published her groundbreaking study, “On Death and Dying.” The subjects in her account were living their final days in a Chicago hospital, and some of them described how lonely and harsh it felt to be in an intensive-care unit, separated from family. Many Americans came away from the book convinced that end-of-life care in hospitals was inhumane. Kübler-Ross and Saunders, like their contemporaries in the women’s-health and deinstitutionalization movements, pushed for greater patient autonomy—in this case, for people to have more control over how they would exit the world. The first American hospice opened in Connecticut, in 1974. By 1981, hundreds more hospices had started, and, soon after, President Ronald Reagan recognized the potential federal savings—many people undergo unnecessary, expensive hospitalizations just before they die—and authorized Medicare to cover the cost.

Forty years on, half of all Americans die in hospice care. Most of these deaths take place at home. When done right, the program allows people to experience as little pain as possible and to spend meaningful time with their loved ones. Nurses stop by to manage symptoms. Aides assist with bathing, medications, and housekeeping. Social workers help families over bureaucratic hurdles. Clergy offer what comfort they can, and bereavement counsellors provide support in the aftermath. This year, I spoke about hospice with more than a hundred and fifty patients, families, hospice employees, regulators, attorneys, fraud investigators, and end-of-life researchers, and all of them praised its vital mission. But many were concerned about how easy money and a lack of regulation had given rise to an industry rife with exploitation. In the decades since Saunders and her followers spread her radical concept across the country, hospice has evolved

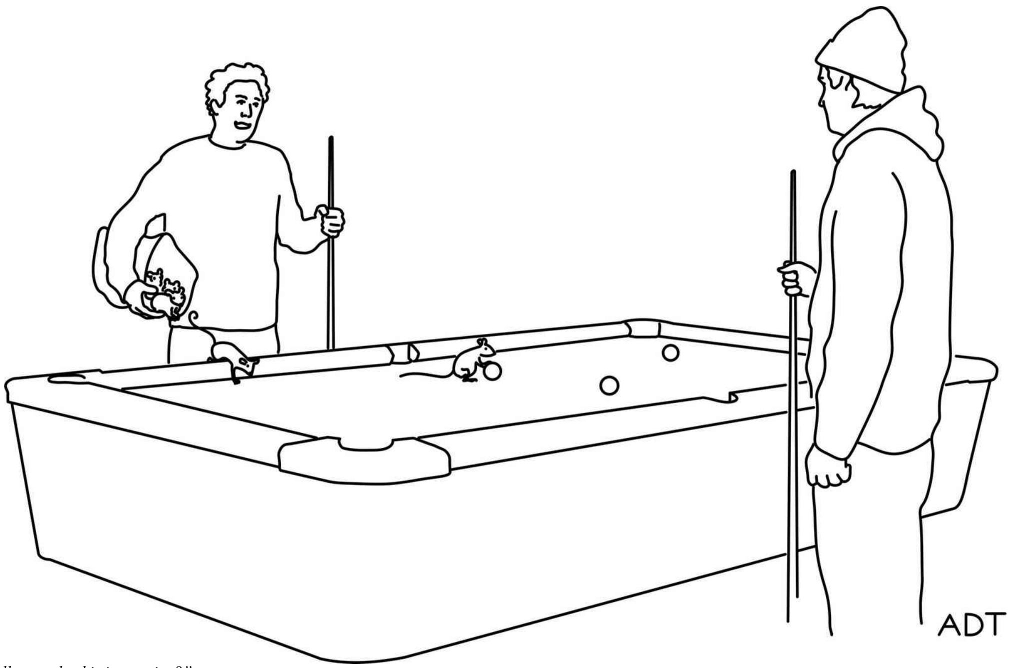
from a constellation of charities, mostly reliant on volunteers, into a twenty-two-billion-dollar juggernaut funded almost entirely by taxpayers.

For-profit providers made up thirty per cent of the field at the start of this century. Today, they represent more than seventy per cent, and between 2011 and 2019, research shows, the number of hospices owned by private-equity firms tripled. The aggregate Medicare margins of for-profit providers are three times that of their nonprofit counterparts. Under the daily-payment structure, a small hospice that bills for just twenty patients at the basic rate can take in more than a million dollars a year. A large hospice billing for thousands of patients can take in hundreds of millions. Those federal payments are distributed in what is essentially an honor system. Although the government occasionally requests more information from billers, it generally trusts that providers will submit accurate claims for payment—a model that critics deride as "pay and chase."

Jean Stone, who worked for years as a program-integrity senior specialist at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said that hospice was a particularly thorny sector to police, for three reasons: "No one wants to be seen as limiting an important service"; it's difficult to retrospectively judge a patient's eligibility; and "no one wants to talk about the end of life." Although a quarter of all people in hospice enter it only in their final five days, most of the Medicare spending on hospice is for patients whose stays exceed six months. In 2018, the Office of Inspector General at the Department of Health and Human Services estimated that inappropriate billing by hospice providers had cost taxpayers "hundreds of millions of dollars." Stone and others I spoke to believe the figure to be far higher.

Some hospice firms bribe physicians to bring them new patients by offering all-expenses-paid trips to Las Vegas night clubs, complete with bottle service and private security details. (The former mayor of Rio Bravo, Texas, who was also a doctor, received outright kickbacks.) Other audacious for-profit players enlist family and friends to act as make-believe clients, lure addicts with the promise of free painkillers, dupe people into the program by claiming that it's free home health care, or steal personal information to enroll "phantom patients." A twenty-nine-year-old pregnant woman learned that she'd been enrolled in Revelation Hospice, in the Mississippi Delta (which at one time discharged ninety-three per cent of its patients alive),

only when she visited her doctor for a blood test. In Frisco, Texas, according to the F.B.I., a hospice owner tried to evade the Medicare-repayment problem by instructing staff to overdose patients who were staying on the service too long. He texted a nurse about one patient, “He better not make it tomorrow. Or I will blame u.” The owner was sentenced to more than thirteen years in prison for fraud, in a plea deal that made no allegations about patient deaths.



“Shall we make this interesting?”
Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

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A medical background is not required to enter the business. I’ve come across hospices owned by accountants; vacation-rental superhosts; a criminal-defense attorney who represented a hospice employee convicted of fraud and was later investigated for hospice fraud himself; and a man convicted of

drug distribution who went on to fraudulently bill Medicare more than five million dollars for an end-of-life-care business that involved handling large quantities of narcotics.

Once a hospice is up and running, oversight is scarce. Regulations require surveyors to inspect hospice operations once every three years, even though complaints about quality of care are widespread. A government review of inspection reports from 2012 to 2016 found that the majority of all hospices had serious deficiencies, such as failures to train staff, manage pain, and treat bedsores. Still, regulators rarely punish bad actors. Between 2014 and 2017, according to the Government Accountability Office, only nineteen of the more than four thousand U.S. hospices were cut off from Medicare funding.

Because patients who enroll in the service forgo curative care, hospice may harm patients who aren't actually dying. Sandy Morales, who until recently was a case manager at the California Senior Medicare Patrol hotline, told me about a cancer patient who'd lost access to his chemotherapy treatment after being put in hospice without his knowledge. Other unwitting recruits were denied kidney dialysis, mammograms, coverage for life-saving medications, or a place on the waiting list for a liver transplant. In response to concerns from families, Morales and her community partners recently posted warnings in Spanish and English in senior apartment buildings, libraries, and doughnut shops across the state. "Have you suddenly lost access to your doctor?" the notices read. "Can't get your medications at the pharmacy? Beware! You may have been tricked into signing up for a program that is medically unnecessary for you."

Some providers capitalize on the fact that most hospice care takes place behind closed doors, and that those who might protest poor treatment are often too sick or stressed to do so. One way of increasing company returns is to ghost the dying. A 2016 study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* of more than six hundred thousand patients found that twelve per cent received no visits from hospice workers in the last two days of life. (Patients who died on a Sunday had some of the worst luck.) For-profit hospices have been found to have higher rates of no-shows and substantiated complaints than their nonprofit counterparts, and to disproportionately discharge patients alive when they approach Medicare's reimbursement limit.

“There are so many ways to do fraud, so why pick this one?” Stone said. This was more or less what Marsha Farmer and Dawn Richardson had been wondering when they filed their complaint against AseraCare in 2009. Now, working undercover, they imagined themselves as part of the solution.

In the absence of guardrails, whistle-blowers like Farmer and Richardson have become the government’s primary defense against hospice wrongdoing—an arrangement that James Barger, their lawyer, describes as placing “a ludicrous amount of optimism in a system with a capitalist payee and a socialist payer.” Seven out of ten of the largest hospices in the U.S. have been sued at least once by former employees under the federal False Claims Act. The law includes a “qui tam” provision—the term derives from a Latin phrase that translates as “he who sues on behalf of the King as well as himself”—that deputizes private citizens to bring lawsuits that accuse government contractors of fraud and lets them share in any money recovered. Qui-tam complaints, like Farmer and Richardson’s, are initially filed secretly, under seal, to give the Justice Department a chance to investigate a target without exposing the tipster. If the government decides to proceed, it takes over the litigation. In 2021 alone, the government recovered more than $1.6 billion from qui-tam lawsuits, and the total amount awarded to whistle-blowers was two hundred and thirty-seven million dollars.

In the two years after Farmer and Richardson filed their complaint, both slept poorly. But their covert undertaking also felt cathartic—mental indemnification against a job that troubled their consciences. Farmer continued to bring in patients at AseraCare while passing company documents to Barger, including spreadsheets analyzing admissions quotas and a training PowerPoint used by the company’s national medical adviser, Dr. James Avery. A pulmonologist who was fond of citing Seneca, Tolstoy, and Primo Levi in his slides, Avery urged nurses to “be a detective” and to “look for clues” if a patient didn’t initially appear to fit a common hospice diagnosis. (Avery said that he never encouraged employees to admit ineligible patients.) He sometimes concluded his lectures with a spin on an idea from Goethe’s “Faust”: “Perpetual striving that has no goal but only progress or increase is a horror.”

Barger was impressed by the records that Farmer collected and even more so by her candor about her involvement in AseraCare’s schemes. She and

Richardson reminded him of friends he'd had growing up: smart, always finishing each other's sentences, and not, he said, "trying to be heroes." Nor, as it turned out, were they the only AseraCare employees raising questions about company ethics. The year before, three nurses in the Milwaukee office had filed a qui-tam complaint outlining similar corporate practices. The False Claims Act has a "first to file" rule, so the Wisconsin nurses could have tried to block Farmer and Richardson from proceeding with their case. Instead, the nurses decided to team up with their Alabama colleagues, even if it meant that they'd each receive a smaller share of the potential recovery. Also joining the crew was Dr. Joseph Micca, a former medical director at an AseraCare hospice in Atlanta. Every hospice is required to hire or contract with a doctor to sign forms certifying a patient's eligibility for the program, and Micca accused the company of both ineligible enrollments and lapses in patient care. In his deposition, he described one patient who was given morphine against his orders and was kept in hospice care for months after she'd recovered from a heart attack. The woman, who was eventually discharged, lived several more years.

Among the most critical pieces of evidence to emerge in the discovery process was an audit that echoed many of the allegations made by the whistle-blowers. In 2007 and 2008, AseraCare had hired the Corridor Group, a consulting firm, to visit nine of its agencies across the country, including the Monroeville office that Farmer oversaw. The Corridor auditors observed a "lack of focus" on patient care and "little discussion of eligibility" at regular patient-certification meetings. Clinical staff were undertrained, with a "high potential for care delivery failures," and appeared reluctant to discharge inappropriate patients, out of fear of being fired. E-mails showed that the problems raised by the audit were much discussed among AseraCare's top leadership, including its vice-president of clinical operations, Angie Hollis-Sells.

One morning in the spring of 2011, Hollis-Sells strode into the old bank building that housed the Monroeville office, her expression uncommonly stern. Farmer knew at once that her role in the case had been exposed. She was sent home on paid leave, and that evening half a dozen colleagues showed up at her clapboard house, in the center of town. Some felt betrayed. Their manager had kept from them a secret that might upend their livelihoods; worse, her accusations seemed to condemn them for work she'd

asked them to do. But shortly afterward, when Farmer took a job as the executive director of a new hospice company in Monroeville, Richardson and several other former co-workers joined her.

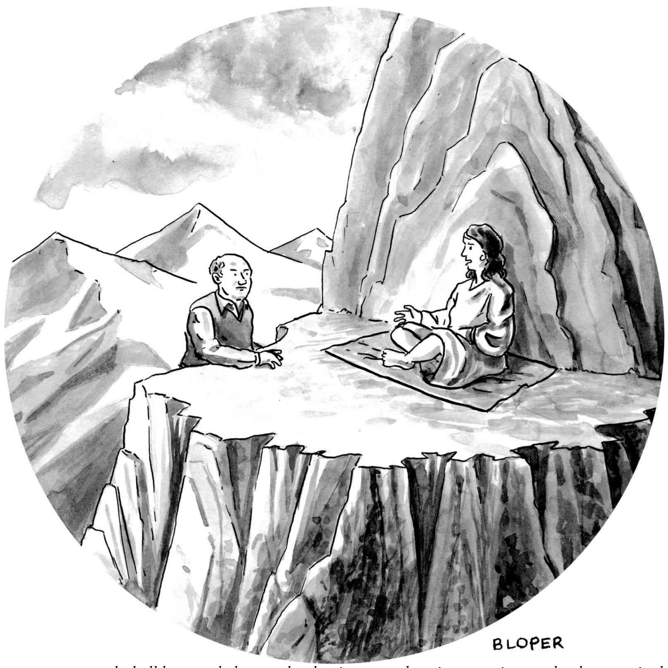
Less than a year later, the Justice Department, after conducting its own investigation, intervened in the whistle-blowers' complaint, eventually seeking from AseraCare a record two hundred million dollars in fines and damages. As Barger informed his clients, the company was likely to settle. Most False Claims Act cases never reach a jury, in part because trials can cost more than fines and carry with them the threat of exclusion from the Medicare program—an outcome tantamount to bankruptcy for many medical providers. In 2014, Farmer travelled to Birmingham for her deposition, imagining that the case would soon end. But, in the first of a series of unexpected events, AseraCare decided to fight.

United States v. AseraCare, which began on August 10, 2015, in a federal courthouse in Birmingham, was one of the most bizarre trials in the history of the False Claims Act. To build its case against AseraCare, the government had identified some twenty-one hundred of the company's patients who had been in hospice for at least a year between 2007 and 2011. From that pool, a palliative-care expert, Dr. Solomon Liao, of the University of California, Irvine, reviewed the records of a random sample of two hundred and thirty-three patients. He found that around half of the patients in the sample were ineligible for some or all of the hospice care they'd received. He also concluded that ineligible AseraCare patients who had treatable or reversible issues at the root of their decline were unable to get the care they needed, and that being in hospice "worsened or impeded the opportunity to improve their quality of life."

Before the trial started, the judge in the case, Karon O. Bowdre, disclosed that she'd had good experiences with hospice. Her mother, who had an A.L.S. diagnosis, had spent a year and a half on the service, and her father-in-law had died in hospice shortly before the trial. Principals in the case disagree about whether she disclosed that the firm handling AseraCare's defense, Bradley Arant, had just hired her son as a summer associate.

The defense team had petitioned Bowdre to separate the proceedings into two parts: the first phase limited to evidence about the "falsity" of the

hundred and twenty-three claims in question, and the second part examining, among other things, the company's "knowledge of falsity." The Justice Department objected to this "arbitrary hurdle," arguing that the purpose of the False Claims Act was to combat intentional fraud, not accidental mistakes. "The fact that AseraCare knowingly carried out a scheme to submit false claims is highly relevant evidence that the claims were, in fact, false," the government wrote. Nonetheless, in an unprecedented legal move, Bowdre granted AseraCare's request.



"The answers you seek shall be revealed to you by shutting up and paying attention to what happens in the movie."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

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Trial lawyers are expected to squabble over the relevance of the opposing party’s evidence—and, in the private sector, they are compensated handsomely for doing so. But the government lawyers seemed genuinely confused about what the judge would and wouldn’t allow into the courtroom

during the trial's "falsity" phase. In long sidebar discussions, during which jurors languished and white noise was piped in through the speakers, Bowdre berated the prosecution for its efforts to "poison the well" with "all this extraneous stuff that the government wants to stir up to play on the emotions of the jury." Much of her vexation was directed at Jeffrey Wertkin, one of the Justice Department's top picks for difficult fraud assignments. A prosecutor in his late thirties, he had a harried, caffeinated air about him and had helped bring about settlements in more than a dozen cases. This was only his second trial, however, and Bowdre was reprimanding him like a schoolboy. "It made me sick to watch her treatment of him," Henry Frohsin, one of Barger's partners, recalled. "At some point, I couldn't watch it, so I just got up and left."

The judge's prohibition on "knowledge" during the trial's first phase constrained testimony in sometimes puzzling ways. Richardson, for instance, could talk about admitting patients, but she couldn't allude to the pressure she was under to do so. The audit by the Corridor Group that corroborated whistle-blower claims was forbidden because it wasn't directly tied to the specific patients in the government's sample. Micca, the former medical director from Atlanta, was not allowed to testify, for the same reason. Nonetheless, over several days, the government's witnesses managed to paint a picture of AseraCare's cavalier attitude toward patient eligibility. Its medical directors were part time, as is common in the industry, and workers testified that they'd presented these doctors with misleading patient records to secure admissions. One said that a director had pre-signed blank admissions forms. "Ask yourself: How could a doctor be exercising their clinical judgment," Wertkin told the jury at one point, "if he's signing a blank form?"

When Farmer took the stand, Wertkin asked if she was nervous. "A lot nervous today," she replied. She thought the jurors might judge her for trolling for wheelchair ramps or other recruitment tactics. She needn't have worried. Bowdre's restrictions prevented Farmer from testifying about much of anything. "I felt like the judge did not want to know the truth," she said. "The whole time that I was on the stand, I kept thinking, Why would you not listen to the story?"

The bulk of phase one was dominated by doctors: Liao, the government's expert, read selections from thousands of pages of medical files to explain why he'd concluded that patients were ineligible, and AseraCare's medical experts took the stand and disagreed with most of his conclusions. However, the crux of AseraCare's defense was that the entire debate about eligibility was essentially moot because, although death is certain, its timing is not. A medical director who signed a hospice certification form would have had no way of anticipating whether a patient's illness would deviate from the expected trajectory of decline. Even Medicare, the defense team emphasized, has noted that predicting life expectancy is "not an exact science."

After nearly two months of testimony, the jurors deliberated for nine days on phase one. On October 15, 2015, they found eighty-six per cent of the patient sample ineligible for some period of hospice care. Elated, Barger rushed out of the courtroom to call Farmer and tell her that the jury had come back overwhelmingly in the government's favor. The next part of the trial will be icing on the cake, she remembers thinking.

The next part never happened. A few days later, Bowdre made a startling announcement: she had messed up. The instructions that she'd given the jury had been incomplete, she said, and because of this "major reversible error" she was overturning the jury's findings and granting a request by AseraCare for a new trial. She invited the government to submit evidence other than Liao's opinion to prove that the claims were false; the government replied that the record presented ample evidence of falsity. Five months later, in March, 2016, Bowdre granted summary judgment to AseraCare.

It's unusual for a judge to overturn a jury's findings, order a new trial, and then declare summary judgment on her own accord, Zack Buck, a legal scholar at the University of Tennessee who studies health-care fraud, told me. The case, he said, "just kept getting weirder." Wertkin, who had expected to return to Washington, D.C., with that rare article—a jury verdict in a False Claims Act case—later said he felt as though the "rug had been ripped out from under me."

In a widely circulated opinion, Bowdre wrote that clinical disagreement among doctors was not enough on its own to render a claim false.

Otherwise, hospice providers would be subject to liability "any time the Government could find a medical expert who disagreed" with their physician, and "the court refuses to go down that road." The Justice Department appealed Bowdre's ruling, but many in the hospice industry celebrated the opinion. "There are huge implications," Buck said. "So much of our system is based on a doctor's discretion, and if you can't say the doctor is wrong you've really hamstrung the government's ability to bring these kinds of cases." In op-eds and on the lecture circuit, defense lawyers for health-care companies hailed the beginning of a post-AseraCare era.

That year, Dr. Scott Nelson, a family practitioner in Cleveland, Mississippi, was wrapping up a lucrative tour of duty in the hospice trade. Since 2005, Nelson had referred approximately seven hundred and sixty-three patients to twenty-five hospices, fourteen of which employed him as the medical director, according to a special agent in the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General. Some of Nelson's patients, however, didn't know that they were dying and a decade or more later remained stubbornly alive.

In the course of roughly six years, by the doctor's own account, he received around four hundred thousand dollars for moonlighting as the medical director at eight of the companies. Meanwhile, those hospice owners, some of whom were related to one another, received a total of more than fifteen million dollars from Medicare for the patients he'd certified. In a scheme that the special agent, Mike Loggins, later testified was spreading across the Mississippi Delta "like cancer," hospices bused in vans of people to Nelson's clinic. The owner of Word of Deliverance Hospice—one small-town provider that briefly put Nelson on its payroll—bought a three-hundred-thousand-dollar Rolls-Royce that was later confiscated by the government. Nelson, who was convicted earlier this year of seven counts of health-care fraud, told me that he'd fallen victim to greedy hospice entrepreneurs who had done hundreds of "third-grader-level forgeries" of his signature when racking up illegal enrollments, and that he'd assumed other forms he'd signed were truthful. Nelson awaits sentencing and has filed a motion challenging the verdict.

The Mississippi Delta has an acute shortage of primary-care providers—a problem that contributes to the region's poor health outcomes. When I

visited some of the fraud victims in the case, all of whom were Black, they told me that the experience of being duped had deepened their mistrust of a health-care system that already seemed out of reach. Some of the patients Nelson had approved for hospice were in their forties and fifties. One had cognitive disabilities, and another couldn't read. Marjorie and Jimmie Brown, former high-school sweethearts in their seventies, found out that they had been enrolled in Lion Hospice only in 2017, when Loggins knocked on the front door of their yellow brick bungalow. A worker for Lion had tricked the Browns into trading away their right to curative care, and Nelson—whom they'd never heard of, let alone seen—was one of two doctors whose names were on the paperwork.

Losing access to care is hardly the only thing that can go wrong for patients inappropriately assigned to hospice. In May, 2016, Lyman Marble found his wife, Patricia, unresponsive and lying face down in their bed. At a hospital near their home in Whitman, Massachusetts, doctors were shocked by the high doses of opiates she'd been prescribed. An addiction specialist later observed that she was ingesting the equivalent of dozens of Percocet pills a day. Only after Lyman told the doctors to "flush her out like Elvis" did her family come to suspect that her health crisis was caused by hospice care itself.

The Marbles, who had been married for more than fifty years, worked together in a variety of jobs, among them operating an outer-space-themed carnival ride. Five years earlier, Patricia had been admitted to a hospice owned by Amedisys, the third-largest provider in the country. The diagnosis was end-stage chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

She was seventy years old and had health troubles: she used a wheelchair and supplemental oxygen, and had diabetes, hypertension, and a benign tumor that caused her pain. That pain had been treated by a fentanyl patch, but once she was in hospice the medical director, Dr. Peter Roos, prescribed morphine, Vicodin, Ativan, and gabapentin, too. Over the next five years, he kept prescribing narcotics, recertifying her for hospice thirty times. (Roos, who said in a deposition that he prescribed morphine to ease Marble's respiratory distress, did not respond to requests for comment.) Court documents later revealed that cash bonuses were a reward for good enrollment numbers at that branch of Amedisys, and that nurses had

resigned after being pressured to admit and recertify patients who they didn’t think were dying.

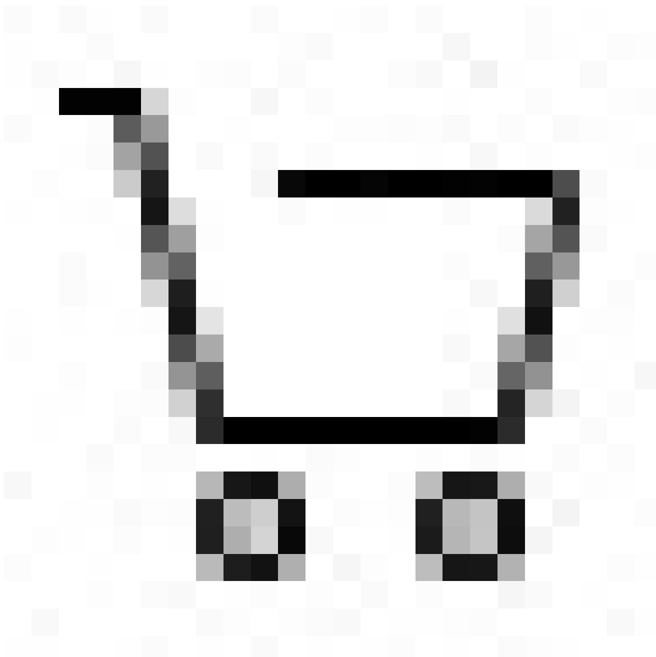


“So long, Carol. Those power lines are calling me again.”
Cartoon by Tom Toro

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While under the care of Amedisys, Patricia sometimes couldn’t remember who or where she was. “I felt like I was dead,” she later said. “It just made me feel like ‘That’s right, I’m in the right place because I’m going to die.’ ” But after Lyman learned that he could “fire hospice,” as he put it, and Patricia was slowly weaned from narcotics, her memory began to return and her breathing improved. Lyman, who had thought that he might lose his wife at any moment (at one point, Amedisys had asked if he was making funeral arrangements), was stunned by her transformation. Today, more than a decade after first enrolling in hospice, Patricia remains opioid-free, and has described her lost years as like being on “the moon or someplace.” For that misadventure, the company billed Medicare almost half a million dollars. Last year, Amedisys settled a suit brought by the Marbles, for $7.75 million. The company declined to comment, stating that the settlement was confidential.

Because pinpointing what constitutes a “good death” is nearly as difficult as determining what makes a good life, families may not always realize when hospice is failing them—even when they work in the industry. In November, 2014, Carl Evans, a seventy-seven-year-old former janitor from Orange County, took a fall and, when hospitalized, was tentatively diagnosed as having end-stage thymus cancer. Soon after, he was discharged to a nursing home and enrolled in a hospice run by Vitas, one of the largest providers of

end-of-life care in the United States. Andrea Crawford, one of his daughters, was a hospice nurse and had worked for the company early in her career. When she visited her father in his private room, which had a sofa and a flat-screen TV, he told her that he was being treated "like a king."

Evans had been living independently, with his longtime girlfriend, before his fall. And, unlike many hospice patients, he remained mobile and gregarious, with a big appetite much noted in his charts. Early in the morning of November 22nd, in search of a non-institutional meal, he climbed out a window and got on a bus to his girlfriend's house. (His preferred ride, a lovingly maintained burgundy Trans Am, was unavailable.) A family friend eventually located him, thirty miles away.

On Evans's return, Dr. Thomas Bui, a medical director at Vitas, placed an urgent order for him to receive phenobarbital, a barbiturate that is sometimes prescribed for agitation and can cause extreme drowsiness. A few days later, Vitas records show, Bui added Keppra, an anti-seizure medication that also has sedative properties, to the mix. Evans had no known history of seizures, and Crawford later suspected that the two drugs had been prescribed to subdue him for the convenience of the staff. After the addition of Keppra, his chart shows, Evans became wobbly on his feet and then so lethargic that he couldn't get out of bed—though he remained alert enough to be terrified at his sudden decline. Crawford, concerned, attributed the change to the drugs he was taking, as did a Vitas employee, according to medical records. On December 6th, Evans died.

The official cause of death was cancer (hospice patients are not typically given autopsies), but Evans's family filed a suit against Vitas and Bui. The lawsuit was settled, and Vitas denies allegations of wrongdoing. Bui, who said in a deposition that he medicated Evans to soothe his agitation, didn't respond to requests for comment. The California medical board disciplined him for his handling of the case. He was placed on a three-year probation, during which he was prohibited from practicing alone, and was ordered to take a course on safe prescribing.

Malpractice cases against hospices are rare. As Reza Sobati, an elder-abuse lawyer who represented Evans's family, told me, "The defense we often get in a nursing-home case is that they were going to die anyway from their

issues. That's even harder to overcome with hospice, since a doctor has literally certified it will happen."

Afterward, as Crawford reviewed medical charts and tried to understand what had happened to her father, she came across some notes that surprised her. When Evans entered hospice, Vitas had certified him for a heightened level of care intended for patients with uncontrolled pain or severe and demanding symptoms, which Evans didn't have. As a hospice nurse, Crawford knew that such coding allowed Vitas to bill Medicare more—roughly four times more—per day than the rate for a routine patient. (Vitas denies inappropriate billing.)

In 2016, not long after Judge Bowdre dismissed the AseraCare case, someone began to anonymously contact companies that were the subjects of sealed qui-tam complaints. Those sealed complaints named the whistle-blowers and the details of their accusations—information that the accused companies could use to get ahead of government investigators and their subpoenas, or possibly to intimidate informers into silence. When a general counsel at a tech firm returned the mysterious voice mail, the insider, who called himself Dan, offered to share a complaint that named the company in exchange for a "consulting fee" of three hundred thousand dollars, preferably paid in bitcoin.

The lawyer alerted the F.B.I. and began recording his conversations with Dan, including one arranging the handoff of the documents in Silicon Valley. On the morning of January 31, 2017, Dan texted an F.B.I. agent posing as one of the tech company's employees the address of a hotel in Cupertino and instructed him to sit in the lobby on "a chair with a newspaper on it" just past "the water station." Moments after the undercover agent sat down, Dan approached him with a copy of the complaint and was arrested. It turned out that Dan, who the F.B.I. said was disguised in a wig, was the former government prosecutor Jeffrey Wertkin.

By then, Wertkin had left the Department of Justice to become a partner at the élite law firm Akin Gump, a job that paid four hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. His bio on the company's Web site noted that, after leading more than twenty fraud cases, he had "first-hand knowledge of the legal and practical considerations that shape government investigations." As

part of a plot that his former Justice Department colleagues termed "the most serious and egregious example of public corruption by a DOJ attorney in recent memory," Wertkin had, on his way out the door, taken at least forty sealed qui-tam complaints belonging to the Civil Fraud Section.

He later ascribed his short-lived criminal spree, which his defense team compared to "a scene out of a B-grade action movie," to what had occurred in Judge Bowdre's courtroom. Wertkin's wife said in a letter to the court that he had returned home from the AseraCare trial a "shell of a man," who drank heavily and spent several days watching movies on his phone in bed. Wertkin, who pleaded guilty in 2017 and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, wrote in a statement that the government's reversal of fortune in the case had led him "to question things I never doubted before. Does the system even work?" At his sentencing hearing, a prosecutor argued that the False Claims Act itself was one of Wertkin's victims. "The False Claims Act is incapable of deterring fraud if the Department of Justice can't be trusted by whistle-blowers," she said. "We have no way of measuring what chilling impact there might be on whistle-blowers based on what the defendant did in compromising their secrecy."

On September 9, 2019, the False Claims Act took a second hit when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit published a long-anticipated ruling on the AseraCare case. The judges concurred with Bowdre that the government needed more than the testimony of an outside expert to prove a claim was false. However, they vacated Bowdre's summary judgment, saying that the prosecution should have been able to present all its evidence, including AseraCare's alleged "knowledge of falsity," and sent the case back to her courtroom for a retrial. "When the goalpost gets moved in the final seconds of a game," the judges wrote, "the team with the ball should, at the least, have one more opportunity to punch it into the endzone."

The government did not appear enthusiastic about trying the AseraCare case for a second time before Bowdre, though. Wertkin had been disbarred and was serving his sentence, and some of his former colleagues had left for the private sector. In February, 2020, eleven years after Farmer and Richardson filed their complaint, the government reached a settlement with AseraCare, for a million dollars. As in most such settlements, AseraCare paid the sum, admitted no wrongdoing, and was allowed to keep billing Medicare. Jack

Selden, a partner at Bradley Arant who worked on the defense team, told the trade journal Law360, "When a case settles for $1 million where the claims have been for over $200 million, I think that speaks for itself."

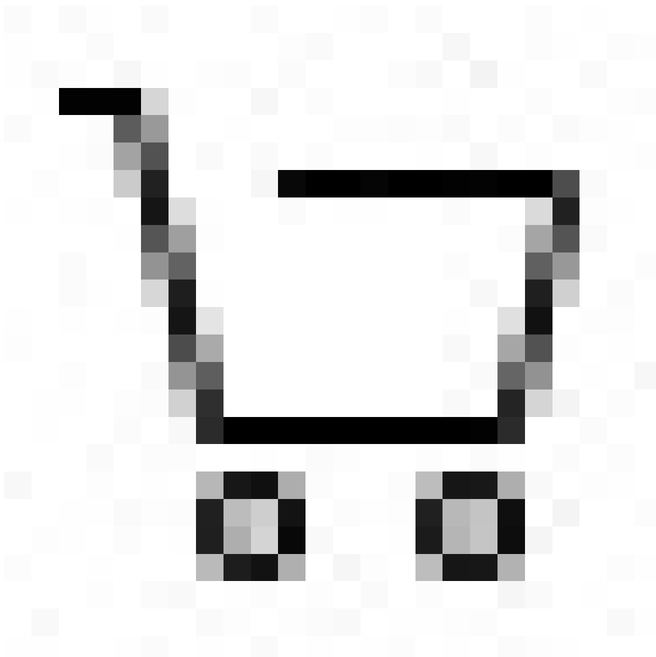


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From a certain point of view, Wertkin's attempts to shake down government contractors made manifest the transactional logic that governs the False Claims Act. Even to some of their biggest beneficiaries, these qui-tam settlements have come to resemble a mutual-protection racket: executives keep their jobs and their companies keep billing Medicare; whistle-blowers and their lawyers get a cut; and Justice Department attorneys can cash in on their tough-on-fraud reputations by heading to white-shoe law firms to defend the companies they once prosecuted.

In 2020, not long after AseraCare settled with the government, the company was bought for two hundred and thirty-five million dollars by Amedisys, which was facing qui-tam troubles of its own. A nurse from an Amedisys office in South Carolina had filed a lawsuit accusing the corporation of admitting ineligible patients, falsifying paperwork, and handing out bonuses to staff to entice new recruits. (Amedisys denies the allegations.) This time, the government has declined to join the nurse's case.

Earlier this year, when I visited Farmer at her home in Alabama, boxes were piled in the living room. She was preparing for an upcoming move to Missouri, where her husband had taken a job with a nonprofit hospice-and-home-health company. Farmer had remained close with Richardson, who told me, "I have a whole different view of justice in America now. It's

definitely powered by the dollar bill." But the women no longer talked about the trial. "Nobody really cared," Farmer said. "The government didn't care, the judge didn't care, and all of these people's money was wasted." Sitting in a plush reclining chair, Farmer let out a short, sharp cough as she spoke. In December, she had been diagnosed as having an aggressive form of breast cancer, and the chemotherapy had left her vulnerable to lingering infections.

The hospice benefit imposes a dichotomy between caring for the living and caring for the dying, when, in truth, the categories are often indistinguishable. Most older people will face a chronic disability or a disease in the last years of their life, and will need extra care to remain safely at home. That help is rarely available, and Americans often end up in a social-welfare purgatory, forced to spend down their savings to become eligible for a government-funded aide or a nursing-home bed. "We all think it's not going to affect us, but if you have a stroke and go bankrupt you're not just going to go out and shoot yourself in the desert," Dr. Joanne Lynn, an elder-care advocate and a former medical officer at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, told me. Once you cross over into the kingdom of the sick, she said, it's easier to see that some problems classified as hospice fraud are really problems of the inadequate long-term-care system in this country.

In the nineteen-seventies, Lynn worked at one of the first hospices in the United States. At the time, most of the patients had cancer and died within weeks; the six-month guidance was originally designed around their needs. Today, the majority of hospice patients have chronic illnesses, including heart disease and dementia. And some of them—regardless of whether they have six months or six years to live—depend on hospice for in-home support and holistic services that would otherwise be unavailable. Yet under the current system, as the number of patients with ambiguous prognoses rises, providers (including ethical ones) are under financial pressure to abandon those who don't die quickly enough. It's a typically American failure of imagination that people with dire but unpredictable declines are all but left for dead.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross thought she understood why societies isolate the old and the dying: they remind the rest of us of our own mortality. This aversion might partly explain why decades of warnings about hospice care—

including a full quarter century of pointed alerts from the inspector general's office at the Department of Health and Human Services—have gone largely unheeded. Recently, though, some of the reports were so disturbing (maggots circling feeding tubes, crater-like bedsores) that members of Congress have called for reforms, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is enacting a few. The agency has just begun making available to the public a greater range of data on hospice providers, including the average number of visits that nurses and social workers make in the last days of a person's life. More significantly, the agency now has the power to impose fines on problem providers, should it choose to use it. (Previously, the agency's only consequential penalty for bad hospices was to boot them from the Medicare program, an option it seldom exercised.)

Some state lawmakers, too, are asking deeper questions about end-of-life care. This year, in the wake of a Los Angeles *Times* investigation, California placed a moratorium on new hospices, and state auditors raised alarms about a raft of tiny new hospices, some with fictional patients and medical staff, that were engaged in "a large-scale, targeted effort to defraud Medicare." In Los Angeles County alone, there are more than a thousand hospices, ninety-nine per cent of them for-profit. By comparison, Florida, which, unlike California, requires new providers to prove a need for their services, has fifty-one hospices.

But when regulators close a door they sometimes open a window. Licensing data I've reviewed suggests that, as scrutiny of end-of-life-care providers intensified in California, the hospice boom travelled eastward. In Clark County, which contains Las Vegas, the number of new hospices has more than doubled in the past two years, and in Harris County, which encompasses Houston, the number has grown almost as quickly. Sheila Clark, the president of the California Hospice and Palliative Care Association, attributed some of the surge in new licenses to a scheme called "churn and burn."

"Providers open up a hospice and bill, bill, bill," she said. Once that hospice is audited or reaches the Medicare-reimbursement limit, it shuts down, keeps the money, buys a pristine license that comes with a new Medicare billing number, transfers its patients over, and rakes in the dollars again. The directors of two nonprofit hospices in the Southwest told me that they had

been accepting patients who were fleeing such new providers. Some patients switched because while they were with the startup hospices they hadn't seen a nurse in two weeks, and no one was answering the phone.

On a rainy morning in November, I found myself in a vast, sand-colored commercial plaza on the outskirts of Phoenix. The complex was designed in the style of a Spanish hacienda, with a central courtyard, a stone fountain, and a stately bell tower. Maricopa County was another place where the number of hospices had doubled in two years; thirty-three new ones, licensing data indicated, had appeared at this single address. There was no building directory, but eventually I realized that most of the hospices were clustered together on the basement level. All the hospices listed the same phone number for inspectors to call, and some had taped the same apology to their door: "Sorry we missed you! We'll be back in 45 mins, if you need immediate assistance pls call us." Each time I called the listed number, I got an answering machine whose mailbox was full.

When I buzzed the Ring video doorbell of B-116, which housed at least nine hospices, I was told by the man who answered that the manager was currently on the other side of the building. When I walked to the other side and rang B-117, the same man picked up. Sensing my confusion, he said, "I'm just the voice at the door." His name was Ted Garcia, and he had been hired to monitor the hospices from his laptop at home. I told him that I was searching for a registered nurse named Svetik Harutyunyan, who was listed as the C.E.O. of multiple hospices in the neighborhood, among them Ruby, Sapphire, and Garnet, which were within the complex, as well as Platinum, Bright Star, and First Light, down the road. I told Garcia that I particularly wanted to ask Harutyunyan about Ruby Hospice, which I'd seen listed for sale in an online ad for a quarter of a million dollars.

The day before, I'd searched for her at a squat building in Los Angeles that had drawn auditors' attention. That address holds, according to state records, a hundred and twenty-nine hospices—a tenth of the city's supply. When I knocked on the door of a hospice that the licensing data had linked to Harutyunyan, a worker told me that no one by that name was involved. Later, when Harutyunyan and I spoke by phone, she acknowledged owning hospices in California and Arizona and said that the arrangement was legal. She had wanted every member of her family to have one, she said.

Garcia told me through the doorbell that, as far as he understood, the hospices he monitored weren't seeing actual patients; instead, the offices were a kind of "holding pen" to keep the licenses viable with requisite physical addresses until demand could be drummed up. The remote work was dull, he allowed. Apart from inspectors occasionally stopping by and transient people defecating outside the doors at night, my visit was the most action he'd seen in months. As the rain let up and I sat in the deserted courtyard trying to decide which of Harutyunyan's holdings to visit next, it occurred to me that this world of paper hospices—empty of patients, valued at six figures, watched over by virtual guards—might be the clearest expression of the industry's untamed frontier that I was going to encounter.

Later that afternoon, Garcia told me that he'd begun to research whether he could open a hospice himself. The market was bigger and more lucrative than he'd realized. People in Montana and Texas and Tennessee, he said, were posting ads online for "turnkey-ready hospices" for as much as half a million dollars. He called an ex-cop he knew to see if he wanted in. "We can turn a profit and split it," he said. ♦

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Books

- What Hollywood’s Ultimate Oral History Reveals
- Kathy Acker’s Art of Identity Theft
- Briefly Noted

What Hollywood's Ultimate Oral History Reveals

For all the clouds of publicity, the dream machine is actually a craft business. Have we asked too much of it?

By Adam Gopnik



What exactly *is* an "oral history," and why would we need one? Most history begins and ends with personal witness, and even written documents, after all, were very often once spoken memories, with many of the best histories depending on recollected conversation, from Boswell's life of Dr. Johnson to the court memoirs of Saint-Simon. Yet the term has become so much a part of our book culture that it tells us to expect something very specific: a heavily edited chain of first-person recollections, broken into distinct related bits, about a place or a system or an event. Although the contemporary version has roots in the oral histories compiled by the W.P.A. in the nineteen-thirties, it seems to derive, in form, from documentary films of the sixties like those of D. A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, in which testimony is offered in sequential counterpoint, without explicit commentary.

The significant promise of oral history, as opposed to the obviously written kind, is that the parade of first-person witnesses, unimpeded by editorial interference, might, at last, tell it like it is. Though oral history from below produced blue-collar pop masterpieces in Studs Terkel's "Hard Times" and "Working," the genre now mostly amplifies history very much from *above*. So, after Jean Stein and George Plimpton's fine oral history "American Journey" (1971), a chorus of voices speaking on the train bringing home Bobby Kennedy's body, their subsequent and even more successful one, "Edie" (1982), was devoted to the Warholite-socialite Edie Sedgwick. That may be a clue to the form: an oral history works best as a series of impressions made on other people's minds, and someone like Edie was *only* the impressions she made on other people's minds. That's broadly true of show people, too. Peter Bogdanovich's two good collections of interviews with directors and actors, "Who the Devil Made It" and "Who the Hell's in It," are not, strictly speaking, oral histories, but they become so in their intricately self-conscious sequencing and broad panoramas of people. In the past few decades, there have been notable oral histories—in the form of books or magazine features—about the making of films including "Deliverance," "Urban Cowboy," "Goodfellas," "Clueless," "Dazed and Confused," and "Mad Max: Fury Road."

What makes Bogdanovich's books matchless bedside reading is the sense that everybody counts. A similar oral history of Abstract Expressionism would doubtless contain a constant series of old quarrels about Pollock, de Kooning, Mitchell, and other luminaries. In Bogdanovich's interviews, the Dodo's rule rules: everybody has a part and everybody gets a prize. Although Howard Hawks and John Ford are given particular attention, the big figures are respected the way football coaches respect other football coaches, knowing that their success has much to do with the constellation of talent that happened to form around them. Because the intentions and the creation are so nearly simultaneous, Bogdanovich's interviews with even third-rank directors make more satisfying reading than any number of critical biographies do. Most artistic biographies are studies in premeditation. Writers such as Henry James or Virginia Woolf can be found brooding on a "problem" that they share with their circles, agonize over in letters, and then attempt to resolve. This never happens with a Hollywood filmmaker from the classic period. There are no letters from Howard Hawks saying, "I feel often these days the need to make a Western, but not a

Western in the conventional manner, of the kind that so many of our generation have labored with too long, but rather—and how to explain this? —one somehow underlit by elements of tragedy, almost, one might say, Greek, though Hesiod perhaps more than Homer, as yet unrealized in the form." He just makes "Red River," which is that.

The Best Books of 2022

Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Only when movies are discussed in retrospect, paradoxically, does some version of intention emerge. Jeanine Basinger and Sam Wasson's "Hollywood: The Oral History" (Harper) now seeks to render the process of moviemaking, from the silents right up to today, genuinely transparent. Basinger, a film historian and archivist possessed of a love of movies (and for whom this writer did minor editorial chores many decades ago on a book about "It's a Wonderful Life"), and Wasson, a former student of hers and the author of books about "Breakfast at Tiffany's," "Chinatown," and "Fosse," tell us that much of the testimony in their pages derives from the Harold Lloyd Master Seminars, which were held, during the past half century, under the auspices of the American Film Institute.

Billed as "the only comprehensive first-hand history of Hollywood," Basinger and Wasson's book is firsthand history in its Sunday best, with all the witnesses speaking formally to a public eager to have the shiniest face put on things, a pressure felt throughout its pages. Though occasionally enlivened by tales of sexual and professional jealousy—we learn that Mae Busch clobbered Mabel Normand over the head with "a vase or something" when she was discovered in flagrante with their mutual amour, Mack Sennett, thereby putting an end to the high period of Keystone comedies—it is not nearly as enlivened by tales of sexual and professional jealousy as one suspects a comprehensively accurate history of Hollywood would have to be. Most stories here are positive, most people decorous, most collaborations happy. Notorious bullies, thugs, and couch-casters like Darryl Zanuck and David O. Selznick emerge as good company men, "rough" and "tough," perhaps, but also "confident and bold" executives devoted to making good movies. Frank Capra appears here as a benevolent overseer—a very different Capra from the narcissistic dictator-director one encounters in, for instance, the fine recent memoir by Victoria Riskin, the daughter of Capra's indispensable screenwriter Robert Riskin, which tells of Riskin's marriage to Fay Wray, of "King Kong" fame, and his attempts to escape from Capra's grip. (The memoir is distinguished by its portrayal of a beautiful actress who preferred a Jewish wit to a giant ape.) For a fuller, stereoscopic view, we might read with this book in one hand and Kenneth Anger's "Hollywood Babylon" in the other.

Nonetheless, it is, as people used to say before books were turned on rather than picked up, a hard book to put down. The special virtue of Basinger and Wasson's work is its seamlessly sequential organization, so that talk about cinematographers flows neatly into talk about writers, which flows into talk about actors, almost all of it magically mucilaged part to part. With a net cast this wide, many glimmering fish are drawn up. We get wonderful testimony from Hannah Sheeld, a onetime "script girl"—what we would now call a continuity supervisor—detailing how electric the mundane job of making certain that everything is the same from scene to scene can be. "She is the only one whose eyes are riveted at all times," Sheeld tells us, and she can make an editor's life much easier if she takes specific notes on each take (e.g., "Take one was NG"—no good—"because of fluffed lines throughout"). Elia Kazan explains that, having come from the theatre, he had to learn to trust the sustained long shot and resist the urge to cut into it. "The

whole thing with a theatre-trained person is to jump in and see the facial expression," Kazan says, but Ford taught him that it was often best to leave it a mystery. Cinematographers seem on the whole happy—they were the ones on set who actually communed most intimately with the stars, lighting away lines and fixing facial angles—and composers on the whole not: Elmer Bernstein recalls having to write, for Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," specific set themes for Moses, evil, God, and Exodus. ("All of these things worked in a rather literal way.") Nobody who loves old movies won't be tickled to discover that Clark Gable's jackets in "Gone with the Wind" had padded shoulders, in an anachronistic, nineteen-thirties style, which differentiated him from the rest of the nineteenth-century Southern gents. On the other hand, Joan Crawford, though she always *seems* to be in shoulder pads, never needed them. "Her shoulders were naturally square," the designer Jean-Louis announces. Of such winning details is the book built, often delightfully.

The good cheer that "Hollywood: An Oral History" exudes extends down past the shoulders and into areas where one finds it hard to credit all the geniality. The producer Pandro Berman says blandly, "While I can well understand the anguish that writers suffered during the days when there were four and five and six writers on a film, I must say I also understand the predicament of the producer who time after time would find he couldn't get a good screenplay from *a* writer and had to get certain values from other writers." This shrugging defense of the assembly-line system is not, to put it mildly, the way that the writers saw the thing; nowhere in the book is there anything resembling Raymond Chandler's once famous diatribe: "It is the essence of this system that it seeks to exploit a talent without permitting it the right to be a talent. It cannot be done; you can only destroy the talent, which is exactly what happens—when there is any to destroy."

Old Hollywood has by now become so enshrined that we strain to recall the cynical, disgusted view of it that used to be taken for granted among high-minded people. For decades, S. J. Perelman, a veteran of the system, got terrific comedy in these pages out of sending up the inanities and the grotesque pretensions of Hollywood producers—while also guying the pretensions of the art-house cinema, with its relentless festivals of "Battleship Potemkin" and "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari." These days, Erich von Stroheim's "Foolish Wives," whose absurdities of story and style

Perelman mocked, is played, in worthily restored form, in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, as though it were, well, “Battleship Potemkin.” Who now remembers that Raymond Chandler also called Hollywood “an endless contention of tawdry egos, some of them powerful, almost all of them vociferous, and almost none of them capable of anything much more creative than credit-stealing and self-promotion”?

And yet an important quaver rises: most of us know Chandler best through his screenplay, brutally extracted by Billy Wilder, for the peerless “Double Indemnity.” The contrast between work with integrity that no one notices and compromised work that everyone has seen has dissolved with the passage of time. How *this* happened, the uprating of prewar Hollywood until it stands with the New England transcendentalists and Eighth Street-school painters as an obvious reservoir of American aesthetic value, is in itself a worthy subject for an oral history. That story would involve critics like Manny Farber and his disciples, who took the actual experience of movies to be more important than any desiccated analysis of them, and who recognized that B movies, the low-budget bottom half of a double feature, had a kind of sensuous immediacy, an enveloping quality previously known only in dreams and nightmares, that made them matter as much as “Battleship Potemkin.” This indigenous candor was met by a French wave of enthusiasm that, in the French manner, maniacally systematized and theorized the same effect—producing the idea of noir from what had been regarded as a bunch of unrelated suspense movies, and then coming up with auteur theory, by fastening on the particularities associated with various directors. In short, journals like *Cahiers du Cinéma* argued, something big was happening, and it wasn’t happening by chance.

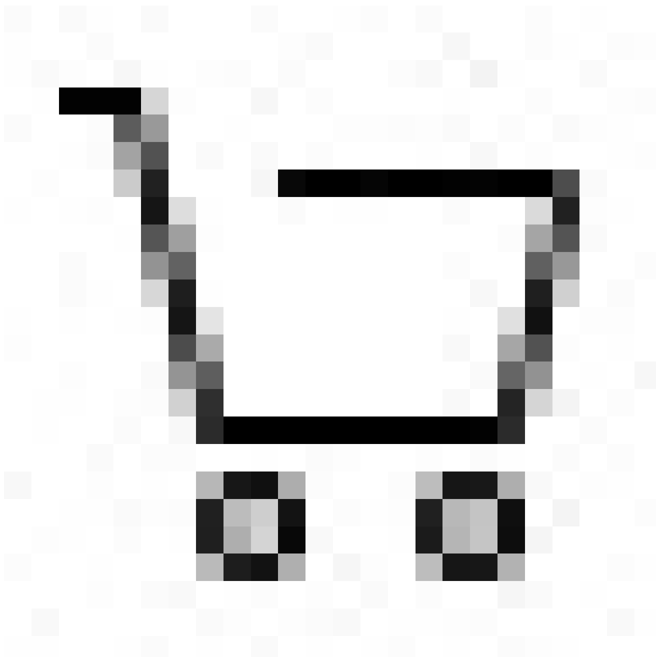


"I walked through the rain in flared jeans soaked all the way up to my knees so that you could run unencumbered by huge pants."
Cartoon by Zoe Si

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Still, old habits and big names die hard, as Basinger and Wasson's book makes plain. We hear much, and most of it reverent, about "legends" like Selznick and Irving Thalberg, while the remarkable director and designer Mitchell Leisen is reduced to being a sort of Thersites figure in the margins, making catty comments about Edith Head's taking credit for dresses she didn't design, and putting down Orson Welles. (Leisen, perhaps the first more or less openly gay Hollywood director, made "Death Takes a Holiday," in its day a very big hit, and later the terrific Barbara Stanwyck noir "No Man of Her Own.")

In general, the book doesn't fully register the big reversal of taste in American movie sensibility, by which the B movies are experienced as more vivid and revealing than much of the A-list stuff seems today. We hear a lot about M-G-M in the thirties, though it was barnacled by now unwatchable prestige projects (Luise Rainer as O-Lan in "The Good Earth"), and rather less about Paramount in the forties, when much of that great noir got woven. The critic Richard Schickel appears to explicate a version of auteur theory as a way of praising famously independent-minded directors, like Capra and Welles. Yet the more original point of the French theory was to suggest that otherwise obscure filmmakers might have had personalities and points of view that they were able to smuggle onscreen, against the grain of genre moviemaking. Edgar Ulmer and Joseph H. Lewis, who don't appear in the

book, along with directors like Leisen, became heroes of an “underground” cinema that didn’t know it was one. Whether the directors of hypnotically absorbing forties and fifties movies like “Gun Crazy” and “Detour” were fully self-aware artists or not is a much labored question; the real lesson is that America was so invested in stories of crime and illicit passion that it made the movies burn through even when they seemed, on the surface, formulaic. Just as there are many great songs and hardly any bad songs in the R.K.O. musicals of the thirties, the form being so flowing and strong from the jazz atmosphere around it, so there are very few dull B-movie thrillers of the forties, this form being buoyed up by the tides of tabloid headlines and pulp fiction.

But there was so much schlock in the system that seeing past it was often hard. Indeed, “Hollywood: An Oral History” makes clear that the shimmering masterpieces and the schlock disasters often rose from the same system and the same people, one after another. This happened most memorably in the case of the 1939 films “The Wizard of Oz” and “Gone with the Wind.” Both were made by more or less the same people, the crowd at M-G-M—even though the musical gets richer and stranger with subsequent viewings, while the Southern saga gets more ridiculous (and, in its way, repellent) with every passing year.

The underlying material is part of it: a progressive-minded allegory is better than a regressive-minded racial melodrama. But so are the bits and pieces of chance, recollected in the book, that made both movies. The relentless artificiality of the sets and backgrounds, so much a feature of the M-G-M style—Elia Kazan writes, in his memoir, of his shock at discovering that the Western he had been brought out West to make would mainly be shot indoors—works beautifully for a fairy tale and has a creepy effect in what is meant, in “Gone with the Wind,” to be some approximation of verisimilitude. (A kind of tacit six-inch proscenium space exists in which no cyclone blows or fire spreads, eerily separating the camera from the artifice.) Turning these pages and listening to the testimony of the moviemakers, one sees that what matters most, in an assembly-line production, is who happened to be on the assembly line as the contraption was assembled. Judy Garland got the part of Dorothy over Shirley Temple; Yip Harburg wrote the lyrics to all the songs, and is credibly asserted to have been the guiding genius behind the dialogue and dramatic moments leading into those songs.

Then there are the makeup people (led by Jack Dawn) who created the frightening masks for the winged monkeys, and the set decorators (led by Edwin B. Willis) who created Munchkinland as a kind of premonitory Jeff Koons fantasy. This assemblage of largely unknown artisans made the movie great, while the presiding "auteur"—for both movies, the charismatic director Victor Fleming—seems largely secondary to the impact of the whole. Indeed, we learn that the most memorable movie moment in "Gone with the Wind," the famous crane shot pulling away from the wounded Confederate soldiers outside a train depot, was apparently the work of a production designer. This is a story not so much of seamless coöperation among well-orchestrated parts as of the proverbial counterfeiters in prison somehow making real money. They really were working against the grain, just as they told their friends back in New York. (The one thing the studio wanted to do with "The Wizard of Oz" was to cut "Over the Rainbow.")

That's why it makes sense to have the many-voiced chorus tell this many-handed story: in truth, everyone's voice counted. Things get stickier for "Hollywood: An Oral History" when the nineteen-sixties pass and we are in the midst of all the big changes brought about by independent production and the demise of the old studio system. That's not to say that indie production was ever quite as indie as it seemed. Given that even a small movie could still cost millions of dollars and you couldn't get a film widely distributed without the support of a studio, those studios retained a lot of power. A memorable and telling moment emerges when the film editor Donn Cambern recalls an aging Leo Jaffe, the president of Columbia Pictures, screening "Easy Rider," and then announcing, "I don't know what the fuck this picture means, but I know we are going to make a fuck of a lot of money."

Still, the old system was certainly lamed as the seventies arrived, and before long readers turn, for the same kind of energy and entertainment, to oral histories not of the moviemakers but of their agents. "Powerhouse," James Andrew Miller's oral history of Creative Artists Agency, from 2016, is a touchstone here. The Perelmanesque absurdity of devoting countless serious pages to the rise (and partial fall) of a booking agency no longer seemed at all absurd. Normal people were expected to know who Mike Ovitz and Jeffrey Katzenberg were and to have an opinion about their characters. Yet packaging and bargaining, too, are guild crafts. We would rather know that

Ovitz negotiated with the Scientologists over Tom Cruise's future than have a cultural study of "Top Gun"; the negotiation is the cultural study.

For all the clouds of publicity, moviemaking is an artisanal business with a craft base. How you light, shoot, edit, even make deals—all these things have more in common with candle-making and knitting than they do with creating art in the romantic, visionary sense. Crafts, being communal, are mysterious to those who aren't in the communes. No one outside the vineyard can really know who put what in the glass you hold. The grapes are grown, crushed, blended, and bottled, and every player along the way, from the owner of the terroir to the person who stuck the label on the bottle, has a part.

And so we're used to seeing the steady, pained smile and middle-distance gaze of a moviemaker being told by a movie lover how movies are made: we praise the dazzling dialogue of the screenwriter (whose draft was never used, but who won the credit through arbitration, while all the good lines were written the night before by the director's pet script doctor) and the mastery of the film editor (though the scene of the helicopter swooping down the canyon of buildings was storyboarded by the second-unit art director, while the editor's real work was managing to excise the cough of the leading man without damaging continuity) and how sensitive the director was with the women leads (whom he could barely stand to be in the same room with). In truth, we don't know who did what. That's why we are so drawn to the kind of guild knowledge that oral histories sporadically supply.

Movies are an accumulation of mundane tasks that support improbable fables. Closing the book, one wonders if American entertainment has reached its end as a collection of myths and legends suitable to a secular society. God knows it has served that function long enough, and filled enough books: Orson Welles as Prometheus, who gave fire to man and had his liver ever after eaten by producers, and Ida Lupino as Artemis, independent woman pathfinder, and countless Phaethons, from Thalberg to James Dean, departing young only to live on as stars, celestially. Even in the past generation, we've wanted more than an account of how all those agents got jobs for their clients; we want a series of moral fables, usually either an Icarus myth (Mike Ovitz rose higher and higher before plummeting to earth) or an Adonis one (Miller devotes many pages to the legend of Jay Moloney,

the brilliant young agent who self-destructed at thirty-five). The prosaic, alternative story—that booking agents are booking agents, forever susceptible to changes in fashion and audiences, and that all the I. M. Pei buildings and Lichtenstein murals in the world can't cover this up—is too banal to hold our attention.

The mythmaking imagination seems now to have migrated north from Hollywood to Silicon Valley, where Elon Musk and Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos more quickly summon up mythopoeic types for our era, with Jobs as the classic returning hero who dies before his time and Bezos as our Daedalus, with a hand in all manufactured things. These days, people know these names and the outlines of these lives as they once knew those of stars and directors and even agents. The glow and the gleam of Hollywood are fading. The collected testimony of witnesses is inevitably a kind of group elegy for something loved and gone. We wouldn't need to speak if we could see it still. ♦

By David Treuer

By Richard Brody

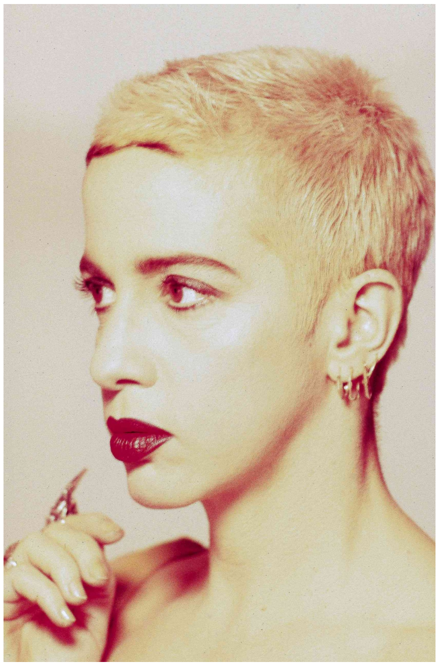
By Richard Brody

By Mike Spies

Kathy Acker’s Art of Identity Theft

By stealing the work of others, the author remade herself—and reinvented what autobiographical writing could be.

By [Maggie Doherty]



The avant-garde writer Kathy Acker liked to say that she wasn’t one person but many. “I’m sure there are tons of Kathy Ackers,” she told an interviewer late in her career. A quick study of her life bears this out. She was the disappointing Karen Alexander, a self-described “good little girl” who didn’t dare challenge her parents until she was in her teens. She was the intimidating woman at the loft party, with “harsh makeup and amazing punk hair,” who nonetheless struck perceptive observers as “fragile” and “childlike.” She was a sex worker, an office temp, a college instructor, and one of the most famous writers on the London scene. Later in life, she was something of a feminist icon, a muscle-bound motorcycle rider who enjoyed being photographed topless, the better to flaunt her tattoos.

Acker made this multiplicity—what she sometimes called her “schizophrenic” quality—the main subject of her transgressive, at times alienating fiction. In fourteen novels, sundry short stories, and one essay collection, she took aim at villains large and small: neglectful parents,

abusive boyfriends, hard-driving bosses, Nixon, Reagan, and capitalism itself. Influenced by the conceptual artists of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, and determined to exploit the revolutionary potential of literary language, she dispensed with the conventions of fiction (consistent characterization, intelligible plots) and replaced them with stolen texts, shape-shifting protagonists, explicit sex scenes, and hand-drawn maps of her dreams. The goal was to break through the repressive political structures that confined people to one name, one gender, one socially determined fate. Her fiction asked not "Who am I?" but, rather, in a more philosophical key, what it meant to have an "I"—or several.

These days, it's become a truism to say that the self is socially constructed. But Acker was an early adopter of this axiom, a writer who not only intuitively grasped the self's mutability but took it as her creed. Uncertain about who she was, and indignant at the idea that she should have to stay fixed, she was always ready to leave a given city, or a given relationship, and find herself somewhere new. As a result, she appeared to friends and acquaintances as contradictory, unknowable. "Kathy's whole persona depended on an endless series of reflecting, fictive personas, like a hall of mirrors," the artist Martha Rosler said. The scholar McKenzie Wark, who had an affair with Acker in the mid-nineties, echoed Acker's own words: "There are only Ackers in the plural."

The Best Books of 2022

Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



In a new biography, “Eat Your Mind: The Radical Life and Work of Kathy Acker” (Simon & Schuster), Jason McBride writes that Acker was “governed by, and thrived on, contradiction.” In this brisk, lively book, we learn that Acker was skeptical of autobiography yet drew repeatedly from her own life; felt liberated by the literary canon but also trapped by it; desperately needed people yet often pushed them away. McBride, who has thoroughly researched his subject’s life, doesn’t aim to resolve these contradictions, explaining that Acker “didn’t seek to be solved.” Fair enough. But biography, at its best, offers not just a portrait but a theory of its subject. We can’t help but wonder why Acker was so resistant to the idea of a stable self, and what this fear meant for her life and her work.

Luckily, Acker’s fiction gives us plenty of clues. Populated by orphans, prostitutes, sailors, and pirates, her novels are about people in miserable circumstances who have no choice but to change. They run away; they abandon old loves; they transform from one thing into another. In her most optimistic work, such as “Pussy, King of the Pirates” (1996), her last novel, such misfits band together and find ways to survive in a cruel world. But in many of her books a runaway escapes from one torture chamber only to find that another awaits: she leaves a bad relationship and ends up in sexual slavery, or she is freed from a callous family only to end up with an abusive man. “I ran away from pain,” the narrator of Acker’s 1982 novel, “Great

Expectations," says. And yet the narrator knows that "the only anguish comes from running away." If Acker's life and work offer a lesson in how to slip the confines of a fixed identity, they also serve as a warning about what might happen if one succeeds.

"I tried to run away from the pain named *childhood*," Acker writes in "My Mother: Demonology," her 1993 novel. By all accounts, the pain began before Acker was even born. Her mother, Claire, the beautiful child of a well-off Jewish family, became pregnant after a brief romance; the father left before she gave birth. Claire met, then swiftly married, Albert (Bud) Alexander, a gentle if unimpressive man who agreed to treat the child as his own. Acker was born in Manhattan on April 18, 1947; she was named Karen, for Bud's sister, a name Claire disliked and refused to use, calling her daughter Kathy instead. Shortly after the delivery, Claire was diagnosed with appendicitis—one last bit of trauma in the Acker origin story.

Acker learned this part of her history only as a teen-ager, and she obsessively returned to it in her fiction. "Before I was born, my mother hated me because my father left her (because she got pregnant?) and because my mother wanted to remain her mother's child rather than be my mother," she writes in "Great Expectations," which functions as an elegy for Claire, who died by suicide in 1978. "My image of my mother is the source of my creativity."

Claire shaped her daughter's childhood as well as her fiction. She was intelligent but undereducated, scornful of her dim-witted husband, and discontented with her life as a Sutton Place matron and the mother of two girls. As Acker remembered it, her mother vented her frustration on her bookish elder daughter, encouraging her to be less intellectual, less emotional, more like everyone else. But at the Lenox School, a private school for girls on the Upper East Side, Acker stood out among her moneyed, Waspy classmates. She was unattractive, according to her peers; unkempt, unfriendly. She also started having sex early and bragged about it like an adolescent boy. When she skipped a rehearsal for a débutante ball to meet up with an older boyfriend, her mother slapped her across the face and called her a whore. "My parents were like monsters to me," Acker recalled in a 1997 interview. "The only time I could have any freedom or joy was when I was alone in my room," writing.

She would find another kind of freedom in a peripatetic writer's life, one that would run up and down both coasts and, in time, take her around the world. This life began at Brandeis, a college teeming with beatniks and aspiring intellectuals, where Acker matriculated in the fall of 1964. She studied classics—the field would influence her fiction, primarily by giving her an aesthetic theory to challenge—and took advantage of loosened mores, attending orgies thrown by theatre kids. Eventually, she settled into a relationship with a history major named Bob Acker. The two married and moved to San Diego, where Bob began graduate study at the University of California while Acker finished her degree. She wasn't charmed by their new home. As she later wrote, "Sunny California is totally boring; there are too many blond-assed surf jocks."

But it was in San Diego that Acker encountered two of her most formative influences: the poet David Antin and his wife, Eleanor, a conceptual artist. Elly was exploring the "transformational nature of the self" through unconventional methods of portraiture. David, meanwhile, taught his poetry students a controversial approach to composition: he encouraged them to go to the library, find books on topics that interested them, and "steal" their contents. Then they would put together pieces of different works, "like a film," or "like a car collision on I-5." Within weeks, his students were creating "wonderfully quick, shifting beautiful things, like racecar drivers shifting gears." This method—which Acker first called "appropriation" and later, more provocatively, "plagiarism"—would come to define her career.

If the Antins supplied Acker with the form for her early fiction, her years in New York—where she moved in 1970, leaving Bob behind—supplied her with the content. Estranged from her family, and looking for a way to pay the bills that didn't interfere with her writing time, Acker and her then boyfriend found work in the sex industry. They started by acting in pornographic films, then switched to performing in a live sex show in Times Square. The money was good—twenty dollars a show—but Acker was ambivalent about the experience. According to her, the show gave her "street politics"; that is, a "bottom up" way of understanding "power relationships in society." In "The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula," her breakthrough work, which she self-published in installments in 1973, Acker offered an extended description of the show:

> Suddenly, as I'm about to kiss my nipple, I stop; I see hundreds of men watching me. I've delusions: men follow me, men want to hurt me, men want to have sexual activities with me without my consent and desire to. . . . The psychiatrist tells me I've hearing delusions; I cut off my hair; I'm Joan of Arc. I lead soldiers in drag and kill everyone. I become hot: I rip off my clothes, I begin to masturbate men make me ooo soo hot. The psychiatrist fucks me we both come five million times. OOOO O yes yes that's it no no? o please o yes o come on faster . . . faster give it to me now NOW oooo (low) oooooo (higher) oooo oooo oah auahhh oahh. eha. (down again). All my diseases are gone.

Despite its headlong style, the passage offers a careful dissection of sexual exhibitionism. Onstage, the narrator is exposed, endangered ("men want to hurt me"), but also, paradoxically, empowered. Sex is presented as curative, yet the comedic quality of the last few lines—an orchestra of grunts and gasps that the author controls like a conductor—makes it hard to take that depiction seriously. It's as if Acker were still performing for an audience, giving them the show they want.

This prose, by turns hauntingly straightforward and unhinged, characterizes much of the writing in "Tarantula." According to her notes, Acker believed that the book would allow her to eliminate "her identity." And yet the text includes many stories from Acker's life, some even transcribed from her diary. These are enclosed by parentheses, as if secondary; the main narration consists of first-person writing pulled directly from work by W. B. Yeats, the Marquis de Sade, and Violette Leduc, among others. Sometimes the book's two narrative modes are thematically continuous: in one instance, a scene by a nineteenth-century journalist, in which a woman describes a bad dream, leads smoothly into a parenthetical section that begins, "I have nightmares every night." At other moments, Acker stresses discontinuity: a murderess's hallucination is interrupted, mid-sentence, by a parenthetical reflection on a humiliating affair. The book is a brilliant example of how the technique of appropriation can both undermine and establish authorial identity.

Acker never believed in the "find your voice" school of fiction, but with "Tarantula" she had found *a* voice that she could use to describe intense emotional experiences, without lapsing into what she derisively called "self-

expression." Unlike many writers of autobiographical fiction, Acker wasn't interested in sharing stories about herself so that others might marvel or relate. Nor did she see first-person writing as cathartic. Her aim was always to dissolve her own identity, to allow herself to be penetrated by others. "I'm interested in my relations to other people, my possibility of getting outside of myself," she wrote to a friend, shortly after mailing out the last "Tarantula" chapter. To underscore the point, she self-published her work under a pseudonym, the Black Tarantula. Soon, to Acker's delight, she learned that she was "some kind of star" in downtown Manhattan, where artists were talking excitedly about a writer whose name was unknown.

"My style forces me to live in San Francisco or New York," Acker wrote in "Tarantula." After a brief spell in San Francisco in the early seventies, she returned to New York with Peter Gordon, the musician who became her second husband. They were roommates more than lovers—they rarely had sex, and each had other romantic partners—but Acker relied on Gordon to fund their lifestyle. "A straight job would lobotomize me," she said.

It's hard to imagine a better place for the young Acker than downtown Manhattan in the mid-seventies. Rent was cheap; galleries and performance spaces were accessible; the market was wide open. Acker thrived. Fuelled by several love affairs, she began writing "The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec," a book that built on the explorations of sex and self that she'd begun in "Tarantula" and her follow-up work, "I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac!: Imagining." (First line: "I absolutely love to fuck.") She was buoyed by a community of artists that included Leslie Dick, Bernadette Mayer, Eileen Myles, and Lynne Tillman. Many of these writers, who were playing with genre and form, read their work at the St. Mark's Poetry Project, or at a space called the Kitchen. Acker, an experienced performer, felt completely at home onstage. Tillman recalled how she took "great liberties" during her readings—coaxing audience members to abandon their seats and approach her, or perching on top of a table, perhaps to see the specific people she lightly fictionalized in her work. She blew through time limits and insisted on performing last. "I'd think how can she do this," Myles recalled. But "people were riveted."

If Acker appeared ambitious, self-assured, and sometimes even manipulative, she was also vulnerable and insecure, particularly in romantic

relationships. (Acker identified as queer.) She longed to date famous artists—in "Tarantula," she wrote that one of the perks of being famous was that "artists I fall in love with would fuck me"—and she occasionally succeeded. But these relationships, usually short-lived, often left her feeling worse about herself than she did before. "I'm so unbearably desirous needy I can't think about art," she wrote in "Toulouse Lautrec." "I shouldn't want to be with another person so much." Her desperation revealed a downside to her anti-identity project: if she existed "only when someone seeks to touch me," as she put it in "Tarantula," then without a devoted lover she felt as though she disappeared.

It was this set of anxieties—about being undesired, or abandoned—that she rendered so compellingly in "Blood and Guts in High School," the novel she wrote in the late seventies. Incorporating theatrical stage directions, pornographic drawings, and Arabic script, the book was her most formally audacious work to date. It begins with a dialogue between the preteen Janey Smith and her father—really her "boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father"—who, Janey believes, is poised to leave her for an older woman. Janey tries to be calm and "rational," but the more she works to suppress her intuition the more her fears come "flooding out." Soon enough, she provokes her father (who, to be clear, is also her lover) into sharing all his criticisms of her. Janey listens to his long list of complaints, picturing herself "like the horse in *Crime and Punishment*, skin partly ripped off and red muscle exposed. Men with huge sticks keep beating the horse."

Janey's vision of the beaten horse is just one of the text's many evocative images of pain, which becomes the book's great theme. After Janey's father leaves her—"NO LONGER MYSELF," she reflects—she recalls a harrowing experience at an abortion clinic. "The orange walls were thick enough to stifle the screams pouring out of the operating room," Acker, who had several abortions, writes. The procedure is portrayed as terrifying, yet also somehow tender and consoling:

> Having an abortion was obviously just like getting fucked. If we closed our eyes and spread our legs, we'd be taken care of. They stripped us of our clothes. Gave us white sheets to cover our nakedness. Led us back to the pale green room. I love it when men take care of me.

But this care soon curdles into violence: the local anesthetic fails to numb "where it hurts"; a "tiny blonde" emerges from the procedure in agony, her eyes "fish-wide open." In the rest of the novel, Janey is beaten, forced into prostitution, imprisoned, then struck by cancer. The book ends with an image of doves cooing by her grave. "Soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth," Acker writes. It's a beautiful image of multiplicity, but one shadowed by dread. If the original Janey's life was so painful, what will her descendants have to endure?

Today, more than forty years since it was written, "Blood and Guts in High School" is arguably Acker's best-known work, perhaps in part because it was banned in West Germany for being "harmful to minors." But it was the novel she wrote next, "Great Expectations," that brought Acker critical attention and a wider audience. (In 1982, the storied Grove Press agreed to publish "Great Expectations," and the rest of Acker's books, for a grand total of five thousand dollars.) Written after the deaths of both her parents—Bud died from a heart attack the year before Claire took her own life—the novel is grief-ridden and lyrical, with meditations on childhood, violence, abandonment, and loss. Clifford, an abusive boyfriend based on one of the author's crueller lovers, takes his place in the pantheon of Acker villains, and his internal monologues evince Acker's deep understanding of self-delusion. When she wanted to, she could represent heterosexual men better than any other writer of her era.

"Great Expectations" marked an evolution in Acker's intentions, if not in her method. Once again, she borrows from other writers—Dickens, Melville, Pierre Guyotat—to tell a deeply personal story. But whereas Acker's early books celebrate the dissolution of identity, "Great Expectations" presents the eradication of personal history—and of the stable "I"—as a loss:

> I realize that all my life is endings. Not endings, those are just events; but holes. For instance when my mother died, the "I" I had always known dropped out. All my history went away.

The tone here is wistful, far from "Tarantula" 's triumphalism. There's a sense throughout that the narrator's loneliness and pain stem from being an unwanted child who never knew where she came from, and thus never knew who she was. "I have no idea how to begin to forgive someone much less

my mother," the narrator laments at one point. "I have no idea how to begin." Acker was never much for Freudian psychology, but in "Great Expectations" she offers a poignant study of how childhood deprivation conditions us to bear, or even to expect, future pain.

Still, Acker had a knack for turning loss into liberation. Orphaned and thus freed from her family of origin, separated from Gordon, and suddenly flush with an inheritance from her maternal grandmother, she could craft her own image, and make a life, or several lives, on her own terms. She started lifting weights, shaping her body according to her specifications. (She liked showing up to the gym after S & M sessions with a lover, so other women could stare at her scarred back.) She took an interest in designer fashion, stocking her wardrobe with pieces by Betsey Johnson and Jean-Paul Gaultier. In 1983, she moved to London, where she was an object of fascination for young punks and old literati alike.

For the most part, Acker enjoyed this attention; she told one interlocutor that she liked being photographed because it resembled "the same sort of play I do in my writing with identity. . . . I'm always interested in seeing an image being able to fluctuate to another image." But just a few years later she seemed concerned that this persona was distracting her readers, and that she could no longer control it. "To say that they like what I do, no, I wouldn't say that," she told an interviewer, referring to her British audience. "They fetishize what I do." Still, she welcomed the photographers, journalists, and documentarians who sought to capture this tough, sexy writer with "rock star energy." When she was invited to a three-city tour in Australia, in the summer of 1995, she was promoted as "Kathy Acker US Superstar Punk Feminist Writer." It was an image of herself she didn't fully recognize, but one she nonetheless embraced.

In 1996, while teaching in San Francisco, Acker was diagnosed with breast cancer. The disease had spread to her lymph nodes, and her doctor recommended chemotherapy, which would improve her odds by ten per cent. Acker, who had been mistreated by doctors in the past, was skeptical: why should she suffer for such a small gain? As she put it in an essay for the *Guardian*, she decided "to walk away from conventional medicine," and thus "to walk away from normal society." She died the following year, in an alternative cancer-treatment center in Mexico. She was fifty years old.

Though “Eat Your Mind” is billed as the first “full-scale authorized biography,” it tells much the same story, using many of the same sources, as Chris Kraus does in her 2017 book, “After Kathy Acker.” The main difference is tonal: whereas Kraus, who ran in the same creative circles as Acker, and who married one of Acker’s ex-lovers, writes with the ambivalence of an intimate, McBride writes with the adulation of a fan. (Acker inspired him to get his first tattoo.) Both observe that Acker irritated many people in the downtown scene; that she would encourage fellow-writers, then suddenly turn on them; and that she had a bad habit of seducing people’s romantic partners. (Her actions inspired one acquaintance to write the song “Insecure Girlfriend Blues, or Don’t Steal My Boyfriend.”) While McBride tends to forgive Acker’s indiscretions, Kraus can be critical. She suggests that Acker was willful—not a vulnerable little girl but an ambitious woman, eager to do whatever it took to become famous. “Acker knew, in some sense, *exactly* what she was doing,” Kraus writes. “To pretend otherwise is to discount the crazed courage and breadth of her work.”

But Acker was courageous precisely because she was so vulnerable. Few writers laid bare their suffering the way she did; even fewer did it in such a way that the work provoked, or amused, instead of merely inspiring sympathy. “I want love,” a girl in her 1986 novel, “Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream,” declares:

> You’re not going to get love. OK. You’re going to get hurt again. I know. The main thing is to always giggle. All the last week when I really hurt, I felt like I had a disease. Being hurt is having a disease.

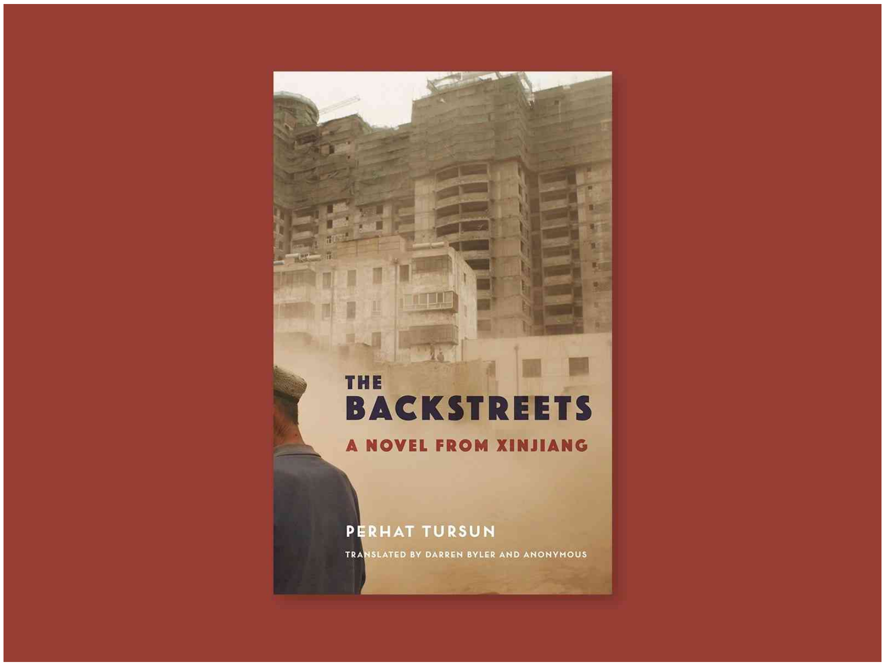
The passage is despairing, self-critical, but also lightly satiric and curious, as if one’s most self-destructive tendencies could be generative. After publishing “Don Quixote,” Acker announced that she was done with copying old stories. She wanted to create something new, what she called a “myth that people could live by.” Her fiction became more harmonious; the characters in her late novels are seekers, not runaways. Acker herself seemed changed. Entrusting herself to a team of “healers,” including a nutritionist, a spiritual adviser, and a therapist who guided people through past-life regressions, she wrote that she wasn’t confronting cancer so much as “confronting myself.” If the process was painful, so be it. “Gradually,” she wrote, “there will come an end to the fear.” ♦

By Richard Brody

By Eric Rosenblum

By Hannah Gold

By Rebecca Mead



The Backstreets*, by Perhat Tursun, translated from the Uyghur by Darren Byler and Anonymous (Columbia)*. The narrator of this dark, existential novel—a startling literary document of urban alienation—is an Uyghur man roaming Ürümqi in search of a room to rent. As he wanders, he encounters menacing strangers, disembodied screams, trash. At work, he is revolted by the falsity of his colleagues and fixates on a sheet of random numbers, searching for combinations that might make sense of his predicament. "I don't know anyone in this strange city, so it's impossible for me to be friends or enemies with anyone," he says, but enemies clearly exist. The author disappeared in 2018, presumably into one of China's Xinjiang detention centers.

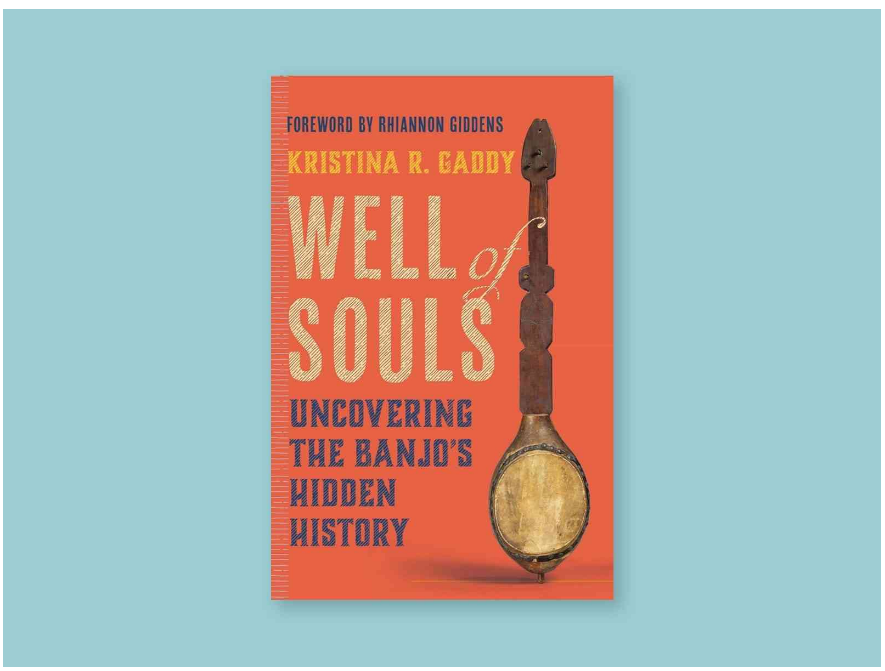


The Magic Kingdom, *by Russell Banks (Knopf)*. Harley Mann, the son of "educated White Northerners with an affection for abstract thought," and the narrator of this slow-build tragic novel, recounts his youth and lovestruck early adulthood at New Bethany, the South Florida Shaker settlement where he moved with his siblings and widowed mother in 1902. (The book takes its inspiration from audio recordings made by the real Mann in 1971.) Like the plaster-of-Paris model of New Bethany that the adult Mann, having left Shaker life, painstakingly constructed, the novel presents "a specific moment plucked from the stream of time and memory and fixed like a butterfly pinned in a glass-fronted case."

The Best Books of 2022

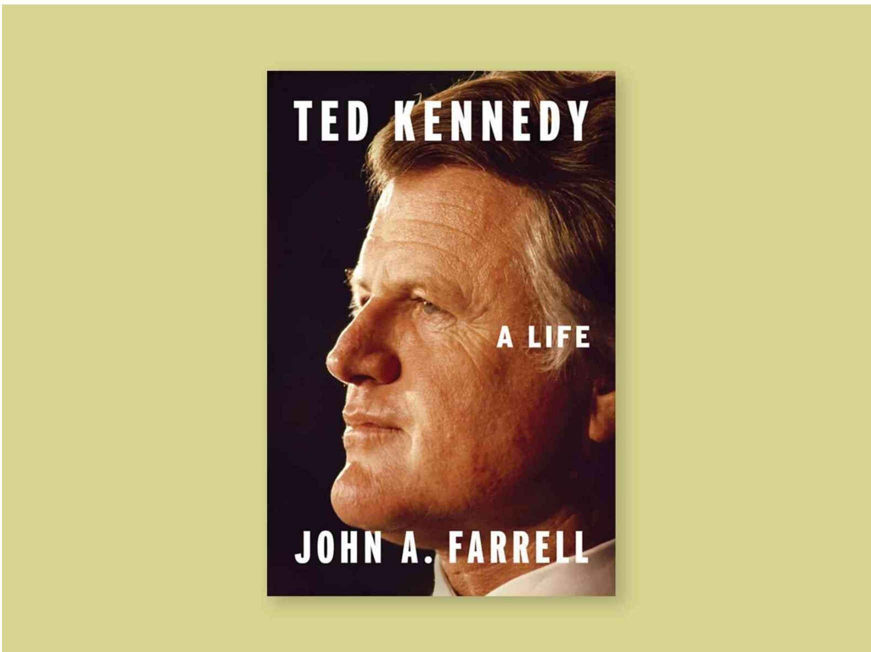


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Well of Souls*, by Kristina R. Gaddy (Norton)*. Tracing the development of the banjo, "a uniquely American instrument, crafted by people of African descent," this meticulous history also illuminates the difficulties of unearthing a story rooted in the experiences of the enslaved. Gaddy close-

reads every early depiction of the banjo she can find—a priest observing a calinda dance in Martinique in 1694, a 1785 watercolor from a plantation in South Carolina—while remaining critically alert to the overwhelmingly white (and usually pro-slavery) perspectives that document the instrument's existence prior to the Civil War. Decoupling the banjo from the crude secular associations of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, she emphasizes in particular its significance in religious music.



Ted Kennedy, *by John A. Farrell (Penguin Press)*. A sense of promise lost and regained imbues this biography of a figure whose long career encompassed the ascendancy of liberalism, its decline under Reagan, and the country's descent into today's partisanship. Kennedy continually reached across the aisle even as he saw the era of coalition-building come to an end. Hobbled by his struggle to measure up to his brothers, and by the grim shadow of the Chappaquiddick incident, he was nonetheless a standard-bearer of the left who, in his last years, helped seed a newly resilient and forward-looking strain of liberalism. By tracing this life of tragedy, tenacity, and service, Farrell draws a complex portrait of a man who, like his family—and perhaps his nation—was "always running to keep ahead of the darkness."

By Daniel Mendelsohn

By David Treuer

Brave New World Dept.

- **Yam Karkai’s Illustrations Made Her an N.F.T. Sensation. Now What?**

Yam Karkai's Illustrations Made Her an N.F.T. Sensation. Now What?

World of Women confronts the limits of selling cartoon avatars on the blockchain after the crypto bubble burst.

By Molly Fischer



On September 24, 2021, Yam Karkai opened Twitter to see a direct message from Reese Witherspoon. Karkai is a digital illustrator in her late twenties with a warm smile and pale-blue eyes. During the pandemic, she and her partner, Raphaël Malavieille, had decided to pack up their home in Paris and live as nomads; they were staying with Malavieille's mother in the South of France when Karkai received Witherspoon's message. Having an actress whose movies she had grown up watching slide into her D.M.s felt "magical," Karkai told me.

Witherspoon was writing to ask for recommendations of female artists making non-fungible tokens, or N.F.T.s. Sales of N.F.T.s in the first half of 2021 had reached $2.5 billion, and the field had a distinct boys'-club sensibility. The actress was one of a number of Hollywood women who felt excluded from the crypto boom. They wanted to learn more, and—in the

grand tradition of minting Susan B. Anthony coins and casting female Ghostbusters—to stake a claim for women in a sphere dominated by men. "I'm definitely on a mission to make more women more money," Witherspoon told Gayle King in an interview, which aired on the day she messaged Karkai, touting the sale of her media company, Hello Sunshine, for nearly a billion dollars.

Karkai had caught Witherspoon's attention with a project that she and Malavieille had launched two months earlier, called World of Women: an N.F.T. collection made up of Karkai's drawings of glamorous cartoon sylphs. The WoWs, as she came to call them, had full lips and strong brows, and were variously outfitted with fluffy party dresses, spiked collars, purple lipstick, Princess Leia buns, and 3-D glasses. Karkai used a splashy, saturated palette that suggested Lisa Frank for grownups, and the kind of flat, graphic style seen on beach-read covers. World of Women's female artist and subjects distinguished it from most other N.F.T. enterprises. (A collection called Fame Lady Squad had previously claimed to be a woman-led project selling the first line of female avatars, but Karkai, unlike the founders of Fame Lady Squad, was not eventually revealed to be three Russian-speaking men.)

N.F.T.s have been likened to works of art, to trading cards, to investment vehicles, and to virtual streetwear. In general terms, an N.F.T. is a permanent digital record of ownership—that is, an entry in a decentralized public ledger, called a blockchain, saying that someone owns something. Very often, the thing in question is a *JPEG* image, purchased with cryptocurrency. In the breathless days of early 2021, twenty months before the spectacular implosion of the crypto exchange FTX threw the entire sector into crisis, N.F.T.s were trading at a rate that inspired comparisons to tulip mania. Jack Dorsey, a co-founder of Twitter, made an N.F.T. of his first tweet and sold it for the equivalent of more than $2.9 million. N.F.T.s were the stuff—along with cryptocurrencies, other blockchain applications, and the metaverse—of a hypothetical future Internet that tech evangelists had newly branded "web3."

During this time, the most popular N.F.T. category was the profile pic, or P.F.P.: a digital portrait used as a social-media avatar. These were usually generated in batches of thousands by automatically reshuffling a limited

number of features; certain features were “rarer” than others, and therefore theoretically more valuable. Monkeys with goofy accessories from a collection called Bored Ape Yacht Club brought in around seven million dollars during their first week of sales. Jay-Z reportedly spent some hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars on a CryptoPunk, from a collection of pixelated faces in the style of nineteen-eighties video games. And, beyond the world of P.F.P.s, in March, 2021, an N.F.T. by a digital artist who goes by Beeple (his real name is Mike Winkelmann) sold for sixty-nine million dollars at Christie’s.



“WoW #3060” was part of World of Women’s initial collection. “The base woman had to be a person that could pass for almost any ethnicity,” Karkai said. “I needed a neutral kind of avatar.”Art work courtesy Yam Karkai

“From the beginning, it was just dudes everywhere,” Karkai told me. Like Witherspoon, she saw an opportunity. N.F.T.s united a range of fields and subcultures—tech, finance, comics, sports—in which men predominated. “I was, like, ‘What if I want to be part of this digital P.F.P. revolution, but I can’t, because I don’t find anything that looks like me?’ ” she said.

As Karkai surveyed an emerging menagerie of male Bored Ape imitators, an idea took shape. What if *she* were to create a P.F.P. collection? She says she liked that she would be “doing something for all the people who are being left behind.” Her goal was inclusivity, but, in her view, this was as much a matter of eliding differences as of embracing them. “The base woman had to be a person that could pass for almost any ethnicity,” she said. “I needed a

neutral kind of avatar." There would be no accessories with religious or political significance, and no hair styles that could be construed as culturally appropriative. Skin tones would range from beige and brown to "Avatar" blue. "This was a collection that I wanted any woman and diverse person to feel represented by," Karkai told me.

Transforming her idea into a reality required technical expertise that neither Karkai nor Malavieille possessed. Over beers in Paris, they pitched World of Women to two of Malavieille's friends, Loïc Kempf and Thomas Olivier, former co-workers from his time at a cloud-gaming company, who had since become interested in web3. They signed on to help. (Though Karkai is not herself three men, she did end up with three male co-founders.) Kempf and Olivier set to work on the face-generation technology and the "smart contracts" that would enable the images to be created and then sold on the Ethereum blockchain. Meanwhile, Malavieille began to develop the project's strategy and social-media presence, and Karkai started drawing the hundred and seventy-two visual assets—lips, eyes, jewelry—that could be swapped in and out, Mrs. Potato Head-style, to generate ten thousand distinct N.F.T.s.

World of Women launched on July 27, 2021, the same day that Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis released their N.F.T. collection, Stoner Cats. The "minting" process—publishing a record of each newly available image to the blockchain—went smoothly, and for the first two hours sales were brisk. Buyers paid a fixed price of 0.07 Ethereum (then a bit more than a hundred and fifty dollars) for a high-resolution version of their WoW; they also received the intellectual-property rights to the image, a WoW soundtrack, access to a museum in the metaverse, and the possibility of WoW giveaways. Around twelve hundred WoWs had sold and things seemed to be slowing down when Karkai, pleased and relieved, went to bed.

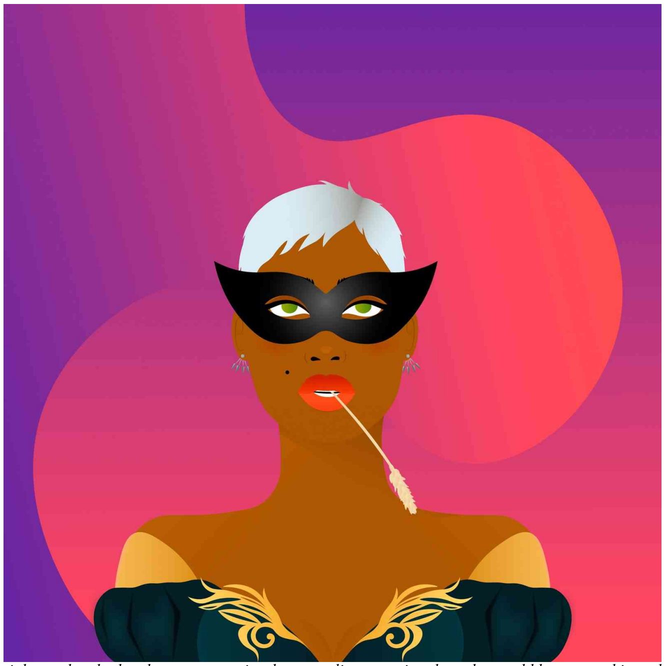
She had been asleep for an hour or so when Malavieille burst into the room. "Yam Yam!" she remembers him saying. "There's this guy called GaryVee, and he's in our Discord!" Discord is a chat server, and GaryVee is Gary Vaynerchuk, a serial entrepreneur, an early N.F.T. influencer, and the author of "Crush It!" Vaynerchuk was online talking up World of Women, and the rest of the collection sold out within hours, bringing in more than $1.5 million.

“The feeling was like nothing I had ever felt in my life before,” Karkai said. Her mother cried and prayed when Karkai called her with the news. Her father expressed incredulity. “This is not normal,” she remembers him saying. “No one does things like that overnight.”

A few weeks after D.M.’ing Karkai, Witherspoon acquired a WoW with aviator sunglasses and blue skin and made it her Twitter avatar. Eva Longoria, Shonda Rhimes, and Gwyneth Paltrow followed. Moj Mahdara, the onetime C.E.O. of Beautycon and a co-founder, with Paltrow, of the investment fund Kinship Ventures, remembers thinking, “Oh, this is gonna be my son’s lunchbox.” The licensing potential of WoWs seemed obvious. “This feels like a cartoon that my kid might watch on Netflix,” Mahdara said. “It just feels like a piece of I.P.”

Guy Oseary, who manages Madonna and had recently begun working with the creators of Bored Ape Yacht Club, took on World of Women as a client. In January, around the time the lowest-priced WoWs were selling for 9 Ethereum (or some twenty-seven thousand dollars), Witherspoon showed off a second WoW, this one with red lips and purple skin. Hello Sunshine soon announced a deal to, Witherspoon told *Variety*, “partner with WoW to expand their universe of characters and to develop innovative scripted and unscripted content.” A month later, Karkai and her partners released World of Women Galaxy, or WoWGs, a sci-fi-inspired N.F.T. collection twice as big as the first, which also sold out promptly. Witherspoon, Paltrow, and Longoria tweeted their support. “Out of this world!!” Longoria wrote.

Christie’s celebrated Women’s History Month, 2022, by auctioning a tuxedo-clad WoW with star-spangled skin. The buyer was the crypto payment service MoonPay, which bid three-quarters of a million dollars on behalf of an unnamed client. “May the sale of this incredibly special NFT signal to all creative women across the globe that your vision is relevant, valuable and unique,” the Christie’s lot essay declared. “The time is now; the time is WoW.”



Karkai drew a hundred and seventy-two visual assets—lips, eyes, jewelry—that could be swapped in and out, Mrs. Potato Head-style, to generate ten thousand distinct N.F.T.s.Art work courtesy Yam Karkai

Portugal, sunny and affordable, has become a European haven for crypto enthusiasts: for the moment, the country does not tax cryptocurrency profits, and several startups, such as the crypto-based fantasy-football app RealFevr and the N.F.T. platform Exclusible, have set up shop in the Lisbon area. Karkai and Malavieille moved to the city on December 31, 2021. Kempf and Olivier, their two French co-founders, soon joined them there. Olivier is known online as Toomaïe; Kempf is BBA, or Boring Bored Ape, a character he has developed around his N.F.T. avatar, who makes boring jokes on Twitter. ("A very famous Bored Ape," Karkai told me, when she introduced us.)

World of Women now has a staff of nineteen, and daily business is conducted over Zoom—Karkai and Malavieille join video chats from separate rooms of their apartment, in the city's picturesque historic center. In August, however, the leadership team decided to meet in person. It was still summer, but "crypto winter" had descended—bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies had collapsed, wiping out some two trillion dollars in value since crypto's market peak, in November, 2021. N.F.T. trading volume had fallen by more than ninety per cent since January. Selling cartoon women on the blockchain was no longer a sustainable business model.

The team gathered in the basement conference room of a Lisbon co-working space, lush with fake plants, to discuss the future of the company. World of Women's new chief operating officer, Shannon Snow, had flown in from Miami. Karkai, who had once made mood boards of her visual influences ("Blade Runner," "The Fifth Element," Pierre Cardin), now needed to do some world-building. Wearing slouchy pants and a scrunchy around her wrist, she stood in front of a whiteboard that displayed a diagram mapping such concepts as "WoW Universe," "Present," "Future," "Portals," and "Villain." Five of her colleagues sat around two long tables. Karkai and Malavieille's shaggy dog wandered at their feet.

Karkai looks a bit like one of her illustrations, but, where the WoWs have an uncanny blankness of expression, she has a shy, flickering intensity. She had been in discussions to create a line of WoW dolls with Jazwares, the toy company that makes Squishmallows stuffed animals and merchandise for the video game Fortnite. The company had had a breakthrough when Karkai explained that the "night goddesses"—WoWs with starry purple-blue skin—were inspired by the ancient Egyptian sky goddess Nut. Sometimes, she said, partners "just need a little tiny bit so they can come up with great ideas."

All summer, crypto advocates had been spinning the bear market as an opportunity to "build." Karkai and Malavieille assured me that World of Women had enough money in the bank to weather the current downturn, assuming it followed the same one-to-two-year trajectory as previous crypto winters. "The partners that are reaching out to us now, they're not looking at our floor price or what the market looks like," Karkai told me.

In the basement, the team was discussing an upcoming World of Women Monopoly set, with each color on the game board corresponding to a different planet. "Are there only women on these planets?" Olivier asked. The presence or absence of men in any WoW-inspired universe would require an explanatory backstory. Now the group's task was to brainstorm possibilities. "Something must have happened," Karkai said. "We need a conflict." Perhaps, she suggested, "there was a terrible revolution where all the women were hunted, and, basically, men wanted to take over." But if the goal was inclusivity, she noted at one point, "this has to be a positive transition." Maybe, she proposed, the women had escaped to form their own

civilization, and the men would eventually be inspired to "reach out" and merge. It was starting to feel as if George Lucas had sold the rights to "Star Wars" action figures before conceiving of what had happened a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Online, Karkai speaks the lingua franca of gracious executive enthusiasm. "I want to thank everyone that has been part of our journey in any way," she tweeted in a thread celebrating World of Women's first anniversary. (Her followers often reply to her tweets with "gm"—"good morning," the web3 world's preferred expression of content-free positivity.) In person, Karkai's reliance on the language of "empowerment" and "creativity" comes across as either carefully inoffensive or guileless."She doesn't quite know how to bullshit people," Malavieille told me.

Helping set the leadership tone was Snow, who'd left her job as the director of entertainment at Meta in May. Snow started out at Google under Sheryl Sandberg, and followed a path she'd seen taken by many other "Lean In" acolytes: from corporate tech director to "cool startup" C.O.O. Even dressed down in a tropical-print dress and sneakers, she stood out amid her new colleagues in WoW T-shirts. She had finalized the company's first org chart, and the team had begun interviewing marketing firms. The goal, she said, was to take World of Women from N.F.T. project to "global web3 brand."

The pivot is by now a time-honored plot point in startup origin stories: a company starts out selling one service, only to become a payment app or a rideshare platform instead. Another tech company in World of Women's situation might have drawn on a deep bench of programmers or on an unexpectedly useful scrap of code, but World of Women lacked these assets. What it did have was a growing brand and a small but devoted cohort of fans—perhaps none more devoted than its new C.O.O. Snow bought her first WoW in January for 10.8 Ethereum (about thirty-two thousand dollars), just as N.F.T. sales reached giddy new heights. "I still feel like it was amazing money spent," Snow told me. "No matter what the price paid, it was completely worth it to be in this community."



"It's one thing to sell off some Bitcoin if your 'investment' isn't going as well as you hoped," Molly White, who runs a Web site called Web3 is Going Just Great, has written. "It's another thing entirely to do that when your asset is what makes you a part of a 'World of Women' community."Art work courtesy Yam Karkai

Amid the broader downturn in the crypto market in recent months, the idea of community has taken on new weight among true believers. Participation breeds a sense of intimacy, and long-term success depends on drawing people in. Lana Swartz, an associate professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, has followed the communities around cryptocurrencies and web3, observing the way they rely on a "blurring between sociality and selling" that has long been present in multilevel-marketing schemes, and, more recently, in the business of influencing. "That's the environment in which N.F.T.s for women touch down," Swartz told me. "It's not unfertile ground."

According to ownership records, there are some fifty-six hundred unique WoW holders and some eleven thousand seven hundred WoWG holders, with significant overlap. The World of Women Discord, meanwhile, has about sixty thousand members. The company's internal figures suggest that most members of the community are based in the U.S., the U.K., or Canada, and are in their thirties; slightly more than half of them are female. Malavieille told me that the company hoped to take cues from its community when it came to next steps. Did World of Women fans want to play games in the metaverse? So far, it seemed like they were eager to meet one another but not particularly interested in video games.

“Fandoms are what make projects happen,” Alex Hooven, the product-strategy director at FOX Entertainment’s web3 operation, told me. For Hollywood, an N.F.T. collection’s built-in audience, with its core of vocal supporters ready to provide free promotion, is appealing even in the absence of much narrative content.

When the World of Women team met in Lisbon, the ideal model—the one with the most ardent fan base, and enough plotlines to expand endlessly—seemed to be the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Kempf raised a brief objection. “We are not a story company or a movie company like Marvel,” he said.

But, for the moment, Karkai was adamant. “I think that, moving forward, being realistic, we really have to build a strong universe,” she said. Otherwise, she continued, “at some point, it’s not going to be relevant anymore.”

When Karkai was a girl, she believed that she could speak with her dog, Iris. As she tells it, her family couldn’t afford after-school activities or video games, and she was an only child who inhabited a world of fantasy. If she saw something shiny outside her window at night, she felt confident that it was a fairy. Magic seemed real. “I really believed in it strongly,” Karkai told me. “But I didn’t want to tell anybody, because every time I would try to say something like ‘Oh, magic exists,’ someone would be there to kill that for me.”

Karkai recalls that after her parents divorced, when she was ten, she escaped further into the imaginary. She watched epic franchises such as “The Lord of the Rings”; old favorites, including “Singin’ in the Rain” and “The Wizard of Oz”; and classic Disney films like “Cinderella” and “Pinocchio.” She thought she might like to make movies one day, too. “I always knew that I wanted to do something creative,” she said.

At seventeen, she took the money she’d saved working for six months on a farm and moved to New York. (Karkai, who grew up speaking three languages and now speaks five, was fluent in English.) She found an apartment near Washington Square Park, took long walks, and ate a lot of instant oatmeal. Once, she attended an open house at New York University.

It would have been “a dream to study cinema there,” she said. “But obviously it was an impossible dream, because it’s so expensive.” Unable to find work in New York, she travelled as an au pair and then moved to Paris, where she shared a studio apartment and took film classes while waitressing, babysitting, and bartending. She met Malavieille at a Halloween party—she was dressed as Uma Thurman in “Pulp Fiction,” and he showed up without a costume.



“Whose idea was it to start with the ‘Hallelujah’ Chorus?”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

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Karkai says that she grew up in Southern Europe and in the Middle East, but she now prefers not to share more than that publicly. An emphasis on pseudo-anonymity is not uncommon in the crypto world—famously, almost nothing is known about the purported inventor of Bitcoin, who goes by

Satoshi Nakamoto. Just as Karkai sought to make the WoWs inclusive by effacing points of difference, she seeks to forge a public identity that is indeterminate.

At interviews for entry-level jobs in Paris, she remembers, the same thing kept happening. “People would ask me, ‘So, where are you from?’ ” she told me. “And then, when you get into detail about those things, people start judging you.” She found that Parisians were willing to be quite direct. “ ‘I think that, culturally speaking, there are too many differences,’ ” she recalls someone telling her. “You know, ‘We don’t have a lot of foreigners in the company, so you would not fit in.’ ” Karkai’s side projects proliferated. She started a cooking blog, and one of her pictures—of a rhubarb pie tiled in red and green stalks—got attention on Reddit. She became interested in photography and created preset filters for the photo-editing software Lightroom. Malavieille “believed in every single little thing that I started,” Karkai said. “He would tell all his friends, ‘So, Yam Yam has this new blog, or this new Instagram, go follow her and like all her posts and comment and stuff.’ ” But Malavieille also had the credentials and professional success that Karkai lacked: a college degree, steady work as a program manager. She felt the strain of relying on his financial support, and she believed that his colleagues looked down on her.

“Then I discovered my passion for digital art,” she said. She taught herself the entire Adobe suite and began doing freelance work—designing a small beauty brand’s Web site and a pet-sitter’s business cards. Browsing the work of artists she found on networking sites like Behance and ArtStation, she saw colors that were “more vivid and brighter” than those of any real-world painting. “They really made me feel a specific mood or feeling,” she told me. She was inspired by the work of the mid-century Danish interior designer Verner Panton: psychedelic fantasies filled with swirls and bubbles in fuchsia, orange, purple, and royal blue.

The first image Karkai sold as an N.F.T. depicted a woman with two overlapping facial expressions, one outward-facing and neutral, one inward and downcast. “We often feel two things at once,” her description on the N.F.T. trading platform OpenSea reads. A yoga teacher and wellness guru named Elena Brower bought “Woman n°001” for 0.1 Ethereum (then around

two hundred dollars). At the time, this seemed to Karkai a remarkable amount of money to receive for something she had made.

In June of this year, “Woman n°001” appeared on a Times Square billboard celebrating the fourth NFT.NYC conference. Karkai tweeted a photo of herself pointing up at it and grinning. “Iconic,” Snow, the C.O.O., wrote in reply, along with a starry-eyed emoji.

The conference was reportedly expected to draw more than fifteen thousand people who had paid upward of five hundred dollars for admission. World of Women was hosting two events. The first was a daytime networking party at the venue 230 Fifth.

As I stood in the entrance line, which wrapped around the corner, I chatted with the woman in front of me, who was wearing Gucci sneakers. “I’m feeling *jpeg* rich and crypto poor,” she said. Upstairs, in the penthouse, partygoers waited their turn for WoW nail decals near a robot making pancakes in the shape of the WoW logo. In another room, spray paint and stencils with such messages as “Dream Big” and “Chase Your Dream” were available to decorate a wall-size WoW-branded cityscape. Karkai was scheduled to sign autographs, but she’d got sick right before the party—if she were in attendance, Malavieille told me, he was sure she’d be mobbed.

A few weeks earlier, Karkai had greeted fans in Minneapolis at another N.F.T. conference, VeeCon, an extravaganza orchestrated by Gary Vaynerchuk, the influencer who had ignited the first night of WoW sales. Admission to VeeCon was open to holders of Vaynerchuk’s own N.F.T.s, VeeFriends—naïve-looking pictures of animals and other characters, drawn by Vaynerchuk, with titles such as “Logical Lion” and “Gratitude Gorilla”—for which the venture-capital firm Andreesen Horowitz led a fifty-million-dollar round of seed funding this summer. (“Facetime Frog” comes with up to three annual five-minute video calls with Vaynerchuk.) The lineup of speakers at VeeCon included Karkai, Beeple, Snoop Dogg, Deepak Chopra, and Longoria. At a VeeCon party hosted by World of Women, many guests wore T-shirts from a line that Longoria had launched, featuring a flowing-haired WoW. “I don’t care what happens to the market,” Karkai said during her panel. “I know what I’m doing with my brand. I know where we’re going.” The audience cheered. “It’s like going to Comic Con,” the

filmmaker Kevin Smith, another VeeCon speaker, told me. “You won’t find a non-fan in the room.”

This was also true at NFT.NYC, where the scene included cosplay. Leslie Wheeler, who works for one of Vaynerchuk’s companies and whose fiancé is a product manager at World of Women, was dressed as her WoW, in a white wig and blue body paint. “You feel like you’re supporting someone who could be—I obviously believe she will be—one of the greatest artists of our time,” Wheeler said of Karkai. She also liked that, instead of crypto-bro parties, World of Women hosted events like champagne brunches. (During NFT.NYC, a group of WoW holders attended a “Cool Blues” breakfast in honor of blue-skinned N.F.T.s, at the restaurant Maman, where they drank pale-blue lattes.)

At 230 Fifth, Kashvi Parekh, World of Women’s community manager, wore a jean jacket with an image of her WoW painted on the back. A college student from Mumbai, she had become interested in N.F.T.s after learning about the Beeple sale. “I was mind-blown,” she said. “I’ve never heard of a creator getting paid that much. In India, artists don’t have much of an income.” Parekh serves as a liaison to such fans as Wheeler and Sakari Smithwick, a young New York chef who produces a spinach, pineapple, apple, and lemon juice branded with his “cyber green” WoW. Smithwick, who met the World of Women team at VeeCon, told me that he became involved in web3 after the Michelin-starred restaurant where he’d been cooking shut down. “For me, it’s a movement toward ownership, toward equal opportunities,” he said.

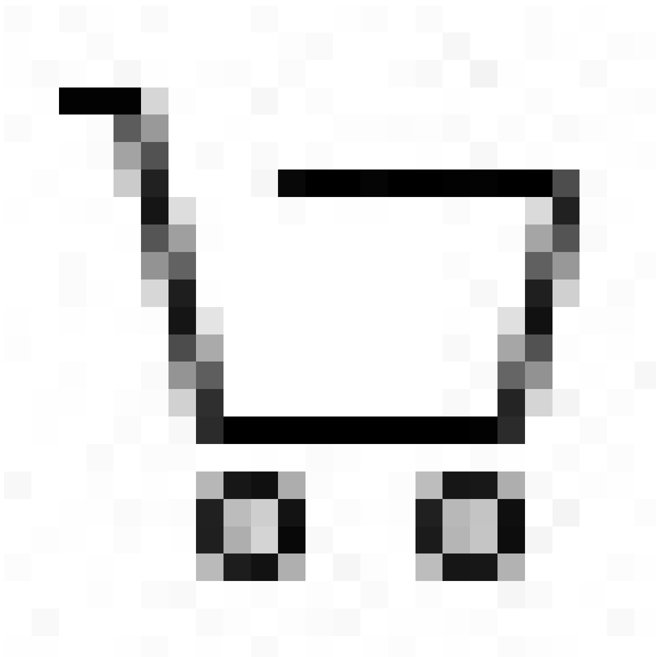


"I have to get up early, so I'm gonna go to bed now and lie there wide awake until I would normally go to bed."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

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While I often heard World of Women referred to as a blue-chip N.F.T. project, the attention the company has received tends to focus on its stated ideals (representation, inclusion) rather than on its financial potential. Vaynerchuk, who got his start as a businessman when he moved his parents' wine business online, in the nineties, discovered World of Women on Twitter. He says his initial interest was personal. "My mom is my hero," he told me. "And obviously there was a lot of conversation about George Floyd and MeToo," he added, which made him feel a responsibility to be "thoughtful" in the way he used his influence. He saw in Karkai the potential to be an effective leader. "She, at least in my opinion, felt commercial," he said, "but not willing to compromise—" He interrupted himself: "I've never said that before. That was good! I gotta remember that one."

Philanthropy has always been one of Karkai's goals for World of Women. The company has a fund that supports emerging N.F.T. artists, and it allocated a small percentage of each initial WoW sale to Too Young to Wed, a charity devoted to ending child marriage; She's the First, an education nonprofit; and the medical expenses of an N.F.T. artist with chronic-fatigue syndrome, who went by Strange Cintia. Since then, it has put on a number of charitable auctions and fund-raisers, and has partnered with the climate nonprofit Code Green, whose co-founder Inna Modja now serves as World of Women's head of philanthropy. Earlier this year, World of Women paid to

offset its historical carbon footprint—blockchain technology can be notoriously energy inefficient—and Karkai was named an Ally of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals Action Campaign. But being charitable, as opposed to being a charity, requires a viable long-term business model. That will come in time, supporters say. "N.F.T.s and P.F.P.s and the communities around them, all that is in its *beyond* infancy stage," Oseary told me. "You've got to look at these things as startups."

Reflecting on the not so distant past, Karkai told me that she'd been surprised by the entertainment industry's enthusiasm for her work. She knew that other projects had become successful in part by giving celebrities free N.F.T.s, or paying for their endorsements, but she didn't feel she needed to do that. "The conversations and the calls, it all felt like you were talking to an old friend," Karkai said. "None of it felt fake or forced or anything like that." Paltrow was "super supportive, all the time—asking how she could help, how she could get involved." Longoria, speaking with her "dear friend" Karkai on her podcast, urged listeners to educate themselves on cryptocurrency and N.F.T.s. "Women . . . need economic mobility, and we need economic independence, and I feel like this digital space is a fertile ground for wealth creation," she said. (Through representatives, neither Witherspoon, Paltrow, nor Longoria agreed to be interviewed for this story.)

The software engineer Molly White, who runs a Web site called Web3 is Going Just Great, has written about a tendency in the crypto and N.F.T. worlds toward what she calls "predatory community." She echoed Swartz's comparison to multilevel-marketing schemes. Both "co-opt the language of friendship and feminism," White has written, with members "promising to uplift one another, empower one another, and fight back against the male-dominated corporate world." This is the sort of rhetoric that fuels not just World of Women but also such subsequent female-focussed P.F.P. collections as Boss Beauties, Women Rise, and the Flower Girls. White told me, "I think there's something to be said for the inclusion of women in spaces that are beneficial to them." But *are* N.F.T.s beneficial to women? "It's one thing to sell off some Bitcoin if your 'investment' isn't going as well as you hoped," White has written. "It's another thing entirely to do that when your asset is what makes you a part of a 'World of Women' community, and where selling may feel like a betrayal." Karkai maintains an optimistic stance. "Lows are part of the journey to get to the highs," she reassured her

followers this summer. Swartz, examining a 2017 crypto bubble, noted, “A true believer is indistinguishable from a shill.”

In November, as the crypto world reeled from the FTX bankruptcy, which had left behind billions of dollars in debt and raised the distinct possibility that the C.E.O. had been running a Ponzi scheme, World of Women devoted a Twitter Spaces audio chat to the topic of “Mental Health in NFTs.” It had been “such a heartbreaking week,” Snow told listeners. “We know that the crypto community is hurting.” She said that the company’s finances would not be affected by what had happened at FTX, and she and Malavieille introduced a psychotherapist who discussed “grief, loss, and trauma.”

“Maybe N.F.T.s could emerge from the broader ash heap of crypto,” Lee Reiners, the policy director at the Duke Financial Economics Center, told me. Reiners previously worked for the New York Federal Reserve, and, in his view, the long-term success of the N.F.T. field will depend on its ability to separate itself—and any potentially valuable applications—from the problems of fraud and volatility plaguing cryptocurrency more generally. But he is wary of the argument that it’s too soon to judge blockchain technology. The iPhone, he points out, appeared in 2007; Bitcoin, in 2009: “It’s not early.”

Vaynerchuk says that he still has faith in N.F.T.s., and that he is “going to execute at the level of a Jim Henson and a Walt Disney.” He told me that he had recently discussed all this with his mother: “I said, ‘You know, I would be going through probably the most difficult time of my professional career right now had I not had the courage to do the right thing.’ ” He was referring to the fact that, in the summer of 2021, right around the time World of Women was launching, he’d started predicting that the majority of N.F.T.s would fail. “I believe that N.F.T.s are the single biggest consumer invention since apps on the iPhone,” he told me. “And I believe that ninety-nine per cent of the ones that came out in 2021 are going to zero.”

In the weeks before NFT.NYC, several celebrity web3 enthusiasts, including Jimmy Fallon and Witherspoon, removed their N.F.T. profile pictures from Twitter amid the cooling market. Witherspoon received a letter from the watchdog group Truth in Advertising warning that her posts about World of Women failed to properly disclose her connections to the company. (Truth in

Advertising later sent similar warnings to seventeen other celebrities.) Karkai and Malavieille shrugged off speculation about the shifting winds of celebrity favor. People change their profile pictures all the time, they pointed out. In a bear market, a famous figure becomes “a big target,” Malavieille said. “I would do the same, to protect myself.”

It would be wrong to suggest that the entertainment industry has lost interest in blockchain technology. Movie studios continue to explore the promotional tools that web3 might offer, and there is curiosity about using blockchain technology to help unknown filmmakers secure funding. But these technical experiments do not rely on VeeFriends becoming a successor to Disney. Hooven, the FOX executive (who is also active in the web3 social club Friends with Benefits), told me that she didn’t think that N.F.T. collections of ten thousand profile pics were the future of web3, or even the future of N.F.T.s.

In June, Madonna, World of Women’s fellow Guy Oseary client, was still paying digital tribute to the brand. “It takes a lot to WoW me,” her account tweeted, above the image of a pink-haired WoW, one of two that were transferred to her wallet the night she headlined World of Women’s second NFT.NYC event. (Through a representative, Madonna declined to be interviewed for this story.) A celebration of Pride, NFT.NYC, and Madonna’s latest album, the party was held at Terminal 5, in Hell’s Kitchen. The “RuPaul’s Drag Race” winners Bob the Drag Queen and Violet Chachki were slated to perform alongside Madonna. Terminal 5 was plastered with images of Madonna through the years and of various WoWs, all in a kaleidoscopic array of outfits. (Earlier in the year, Karkai drew Madonna in the style of a WoW for *Billboard*.) Guests included Julia Fox, Zachary Quinto, Sia, and Oseary, one of the few attendees wearing a mask. World of Women had ordered five hundred bottles of Smithwick’s Cyber Green Juice to give to guests.

When I arrived at Terminal 5, I found Karkai and a cluster of World of Women colleagues waiting in frustration at the entrance, which they’d been trying for about fifteen minutes to breach. “Do you guys have a point of contact at all?” someone inside the barriers asked. They did, but it didn’t seem to be helping. Security was tight. For now, at the door, the usual rules were in effect, and the outsiders were still stuck outside. ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Ian Parker

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

By Ian Crouch

Comment

- **Is the Nancy Pelosi Era Really Ending?**

Is the Nancy Pelosi Era Really Ending?

The Speaker of the House is stepping aside, but her school of politics isn't going anywhere.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells



The job that Nancy Pelosi is leaving is called Speaker of the House, but her interpretation of the role has never had much to do with decorous speech. Pelosi cajoled; she annoyed; jostled by the left-wing faction around Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, she rolled her eyes and sniped. According to a biography by Molly Ball, when Pelosi received a courtesy call from Condoleezza Rice in March, 2003, letting her know that troops would invade Iraq that night, the California congresswoman, who had helped organize liberal antiwar opposition, asked, "Why now?" (Great question.) When Obama's health-care plan withered in Congress, she gave the President a pep talk: "You go through the gate. If the gate's closed, you go over the fence. If the fence is too high, we'll pole-vault in. If that doesn't work, we'll parachute in." On January 6th, speaking with Mike Pence on a phone line from one undisclosed location to another, Pelosi tore open a meat-stick wrapper with her teeth and then told the Vice-President, speaking very slowly, in order to be comprehensible between mouthfuls, "Don't let anybody know where you are."

Pelosi is eighty-two years old. It is time. When she gave her farewell speech shortly after the midterm elections (she is staying in Congress, but will not run again for leadership), she recalled driving up to the Capitol for the first time as a six-year-old whose father, the legendary Baltimore mayor Thomas D'Alesandro, Jr., was being sworn into Congress for a fifth term. D'Alesandro, the son of Italian immigrants, was a machine pol, who operated out of Albemarle Street in his city's Little Italy and maintained a "favor file" of promises and debts—the sort of figure, like Pelosi herself, for whom politics often hinged less on beliefs than on mechanics, and on a sharp sense of the day's contingencies.

But Pelosi also represented something very different: the long social turn in which the liberation movements of the nineteen-sixties became absorbed into the ethos of wealth and power. By the time she first ran for Congress, in 1986, she was nearing fifty, and was a nationally prominent fund-raiser and Party leader. When she took office, representing what she declared to be a district that was "for peace, for environmental protection, for equal rights," there were twenty-three women in the House of Representatives; in her farewell speech, she noted that about three-quarters of House Democrats would now be women, people of color, or L.G.B.T. Progressives, especially at the outset of the Trump years, saw in her an establishmentarian fatally drawn to compromise, and conservatives, staring at the same inkblot, saw an irredeemable San Francisco radical. (Years of conservative fixation on this image, stoked by Rush Limbaugh and Donald Trump, probably helped inspire the maniac who broke into Pelosi's home last month with zip ties and plans for a kidnapping, and who, when he learned that she was away, assaulted her husband with a hammer.) If Pelosi's generation of post-sixties liberals long seemed to have a permanent grip on power—the gerontocracy—this is partly because our politics is in many ways still stuck in debates over those same liberation breakthroughs.

And yet, even as the older leaders are starting to be replaced (ignore, for a minute, the faintly nightmarish prospect of Trump, nearly eighty, and Biden, even older, mounting a 2024 debate stage), the parties aren't exactly changing their stripes. The top (and only announced) candidate to head the House Democrats is Representative Hakeem Jeffries, of Brooklyn, a deft fifty-two-year-old politician with a centrist reputation who represents central Brooklyn and would be the first Black congressman to lead a party. Jeffries

does not have much of a record as a legislative leader, but he has some of Pelosi's symbolic facility (having famously punctuated a pro-impeachment speech by quoting Biggie Smalls). More significant, Jeffries helped create a campaign fund to defend Democratic incumbents from primary challenges on the left—a hint that he shares Pelosi's focus on keeping his members safe from idealism-induced immolation.

Republicans had imagined that they would be swept into office by a great red wave. Instead, Pelosi's probable replacement as House Speaker, the California Republican Kevin McCarthy, finds himself hemmed in. With a majority of just a few seats, McCarthy can't afford to distance himself from the far-right denizens of the Freedom Caucus. The likeliest future for the new majority will feature investigations of Hunter Biden, the impeachment of at least one Cabinet secretary, a focus on border policy, and McCarthy resolutely standing beside the most conspiratorial of his members. (Marjorie Taylor Greene's friends are reportedly already lobbying for an Oversight Committee seat.) He will be on guard against the sort of far-right revolt that has done in the last two G.O.P. Speakers, neither of whom was able to control a caucus defined by chaos.

But every caucus is pretty chaotic. Pelosi herself had a contentious left wing to contend with after the 2018 elections. Most ambitious politicians don't mean to stay in the House for long. The Senate styles itself as a club, but the House is more like an airport lounge, everyone impatiently watching the clock and the departures board and eying the same skimpy tray of desserts. Pelosi practiced an artisanal kind of politics, handcrafted around the limitations of what was possible. The reason the Democrats have overachieved legislatively in the past couple of decades is, in part, that Pelosi managed to steer ambitious agendas through the broad window opened by Obama's election and the narrow one opened by Biden's, while the Republicans did very little after Trump's.

In Pelosi's final months as Speaker, her personal imprint on politics deepened. The references to Catholic saints grew. She slept less, or perhaps it was simply that the legend of her sleeplessness proliferated. Representative Josh Gottheimer, of New Jersey, who leads a group of centrist Democrats, recently told Politico about a late-night negotiation in which Pelosi asked him to reassemble his allies at 7 *a.m*. He recalled, "I

said, ‘I’ll try to find them. It’s one o’clock in the morning.’ And she said, ‘Dear, I’m sure you can find them.’ ” The gerontocracy in the House has been upended, but it hasn’t given way to a tide of progressive reform, as the left had hoped, or to a grand popular revolt, as Republicans were betting on. There is, instead, a situation with which Pelosi would be familiar: a knife’s-edge margin, and a new set of contingencies. ♦

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By John Cassidy

By Isaac Chotiner

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Monday, November 28, 2022**

By Brooke Husic

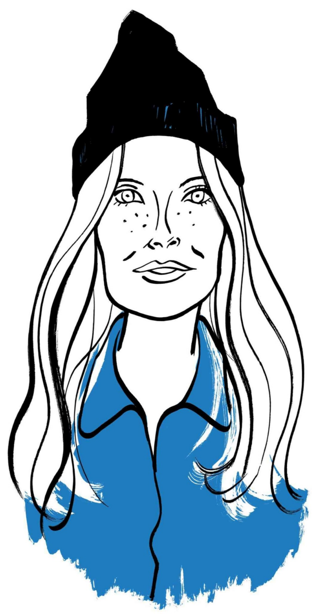
Dept. of Fandom

- **Meghann Fahy Stans Out Over Eminem**

Meghann Fahy Stans Out Over Eminem

The “White Lotus” star visits Mom’s Spaghetti, a pop-up shop celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the movie “8 Mile,” to discuss her obsession with Slim Shady and her Italian-food snobbery, formed while filming in Sicily.

By Rachel Syme



On a recent afternoon, Meghann Fahy, one of the stars of the second season of HBO’s “White Lotus,” bounded through the entrance of Mom’s Spaghetti, a nine-day-only “pop-up experience” in SoHo celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the film “8 Mile,” starring Eminem as the rapper B-Rabbit. Fahy considers herself to be an Eminem connoisseur. Her go-to karaoke song is “Stan,” a menacing epic about an abusive loner who is obsessed with a famous rapper. “It’s not his fastest song,” Fahy said. “But I do think, from a storytelling perspective, it is one of his best.” She explained that Eminem karaoke was less obnoxious than the alternative; she’d grown up in southern Massachusetts, where she’d trained to be a professional singer. By eighteen, she was on Broadway, starring in the musical “Next to Normal.” The role’s

princessy vibrato didn't play too well at divey karaoke bars. "I like to give the people what they want, and it is not that," she said.

The shop bumped a bass-heavy hip-hop track. Fahy, who is thirty-two, with a spray of cheek freckles and swishy strawberry-blond hair, shimmied along. She wore a double-breasted plaid overcoat, a navy ski cap, and an oversized beige cardigan, like Katharine Hepburn if she shopped at Grailed. Ciara Benko, the pop-up's publicist, asked Fahy about the first time she saw "8 Mile." "Oh, it was in 2002, and I had, like, a sexual awakening," Fahy said. "My friend and I had to watch it in a closet, because we were not supposed to be watching it."

Benko led Fahy to a window serving hulking takeout boxes of spaghetti. "They have plain meatballs and vegan 'Rabbit' balls," Benko said. Fahy opted for the vegan. "I'm a pescatarian," she said. "Though I have been known to fire down some chicken fingers, depending on my level of inebriation." Then they headed downstairs, into the "trailer park" (featuring a yolk-yellow neon sign from the film bearing the words "8 Mile Rd. Mobile Court") and the "bathroom," a re-creation of the film's grimy night-club lavatory. They stopped at the mirror where B-Rabbit would psych himself up. Fahy posed with her arms crossed.

Near the exit, Fahy made a beeline for the gift shop. "I *lo-o-ove* merch," she said. She picked up a vinyl copy of the film's soundtrack. "Does it have the rap battles on it?" she asked. She caressed a T-shirt promoting a showdown between B-Rabbit and his nemesis, Papa Doc. She bought two, one for herself and one for Leo Woodall, a British actor she befriended while in Sicily filming "The White Lotus." "We lived there for, like, two and a half months, and we all hung out with each other a ton, because it was like a ghost town," she said. (They filmed during the island's off-season.) She and Woodall bonded as fellow Slim Shady stans. "He can do all the freestyles from the film!"

On the show, Fahy plays Daphne Sullivan, the ditzy, pampered wife of a playboy financier, with a secret knack for playing twisted mind games. The role involves jarring lines about forgetting to vote or splurging on luxury goods, but Fahy delivers them with such cunning alacrity that they reel in more than they repel. "Mike White"—the creator of "The White

Lotus”—“just has this insane ability to cast, like, the perfect person,” Fahy said. “I watch the show as a fan, and I see everyone else’s performances, and I’m, like, I cannot imagine anybody but you.” She went on, “I auditioned for Season 1 and got really close.” The role ended up going to Alexandra Daddario.

After loading up a bag with “8 Mile” memorabilia, including a hoodie and a Carhartt hat, Fahy ventured out to the street to eat her promotional pasta. She plopped down on a concrete stoop. The takeout box weighed about as much as a Pomeranian. The noodles were slicked with a red sauce that smelled and tasted like supermarket Ragú. “At least it’s still warm,” Fahy said, shoving a plastic forkful into her mouth. She made it about halfway through the box before declaring that she’d ingested as much Eminem-branded carbs as she could take. “It was pretty mediocre,” she said. “But, also, I kind of wanted it to be?”

Fahy said she’d become a food snob after shooting in Italy. The best thing she ate? “Probably the eggplant parm that I *made*,” she said, laughing. “A guy who owned this restaurant offered me a cooking class. So I show up, and the restaurant is open. They’re serving lunch. And he’s, like, ‘Just get in the kitchen.’ We just ended up working that day, plating food and serving it to customers.”

Her parm turned out, but Fahy had some residual guilt. “I’m kind of on the fence about it,” she said. “If I was in Sicily, and I went to a restaurant and there was an American girl in the kitchen trying it out for the first time, and I was *paying* for that?” She shook her head. “I’d be, like, what the F?” ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Helen Shaw

Disaster Readiness Dept.

- **Predicting the Earthquake That Could Wreck New York**

Predicting the Earthquake That Could Wreck New York

A geologist heads to the hills to study precariously perched boulders, which could provide clues to the frequency of the rare major quakes that shake the region.

By Ben McGrath



Every now and then, the ground trembles, in some places more often and more dramatically than in others. New York is no California. Still, Brooklyn chimneys toppled and windows shattered in the summer of 1884, when a quake struck near Coney Island: magnitude 5, or thereabouts. (Seismometers were not then in wide circulation.) Anything larger, amid today's infrastructure, would cause quite a bit of damage. But we have scant records about how frequently such a quake occurs. "Every thousand years, every ten thousand years, every million years?," William Menke, a seismologist at Columbia's Lamont-Doherty observatory, wondered recently, with the potential destruction of the metropolitan region in mind. "It makes a difference!" Many major earthquakes have occurred on the East Coast, he explained. We just don't know when.

Menke was hiking up a mountain in Harriman State Park, beside the Ramapo Fault, to try to fill in the gaps. He was in search of rocks whose shape and placement gave him a sense of existential comfort instead of dread. “That was the one that started me thinking about this,” he said, arriving at a bobsled-size boulder perched near the edge of a shallow cliff. “That must say something important about the amount of shaking that occurred since it was put up there. If there was a lot of shaking, it would have fallen.” A hiking companion couldn’t resist a futile push. The boulder was deposited there, of course, by a glacier. “Everything here reeks of the Ice Age,” Menke said. The last of the glaciers melted in these parts around fifteen thousand years ago. Auspicious.

The two continued climbing, in search of ever more precariously perched boulders. Some were too small to rule out human intervention. “You can see somebody moved those hefty rocks into a bench configuration,” Menke noted of one arrangement, near the remains of a campfire. Another boulder, intriguingly top-heavy, sat in a crack, making it harder to dislodge, and therefore unworthy of scrutiny. Menke crouched beside others to sketch their contours in a notebook and measure the slopes of the underlying bedrock, using a carpenter’s level and an inclinometer, for which he’d paid eight dollars at Lowe’s. “Most of the stuff I do is pretty low tech,” he said. “I have occasionally lost things in the field and then found them six months later, a little rusty.”

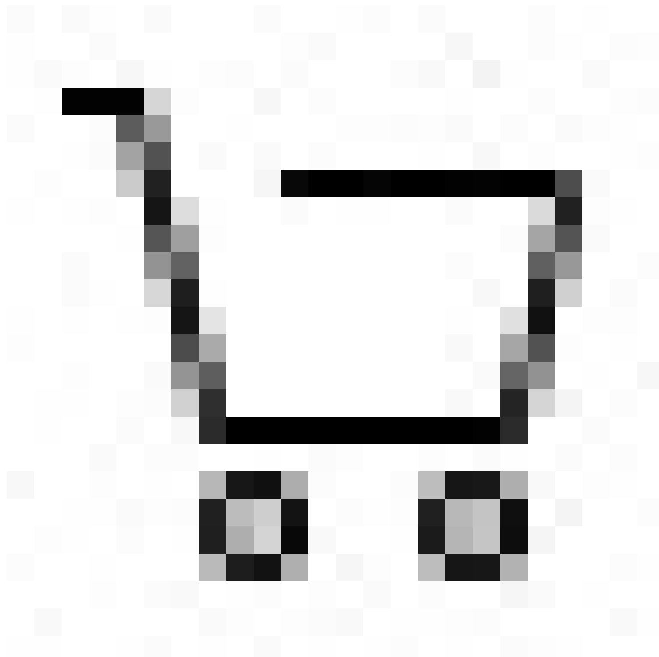


"It's made from one hundred per cent dinosaur-based petroleum products."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

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Shop



Menke’s gray hair was untrimmed and, like some of the stones he examined, in seeming defiance of gravity. His fixation on the geology was such that he failed to notice a buck galloping past, though he called attention to a small discoloration in the bedrock at one point. “See the surface here? Something was protecting this from erosion. Was there a boulder there that rolled off? Where is it?” Using some back-of-the-envelope physics, he estimated the amount of gravitational acceleration required to send various candidates in his notebook sliding downhill. “The last one we did was on a more gentle slope, and it was about point three of gravity,” he said. “So that would be about a seven-and-a-half magnitude.” By contrast, a giant sea-turtle-shaped rock on a steeper slope seemed likely to ski with a magnitude 7. “So that, actually, is an interesting number,” Menke said. “If you can rule out that there have been any earthquakes of magnitude 7 since the end of the Ice Age, that actually is pretty important in terms of New York’s seismic risk.”

Proper science would require his following up with sophisticated camera technology, for photogrammetry and 3-D computer modelling. “I’ll tell you a funny story about a Greek dude,” Menke said, referring to the astronomer Aristarchus, who attempted to estimate the distance from the earth to the sun. “He did a pretty good job, but there was a critical piece of info he needed to know, and that was the angular diameter of the sun. It’s half a degree, and he guessed that it was two degrees. Had he been careful to

measure things, he would have gotten the right number." For now, though, Menke took comfort in what the naked eye was telling him. Then again, a magnitude 7 earthquake is a thousand times more powerful than a magnitude 5. Think of Haiti in 2010, instead of Coney Island in 1884.

Pausing for a water break before beginning his descent, Menke ran his hand over another boulder and broke off a piece of crusty rock tripe, or lichen. "Very low nutritional value," he said. "But if faced with a choice between eating rock tripe and dying, you eat rock tripe." ♦

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Ted Geltner

By Lauren Collins

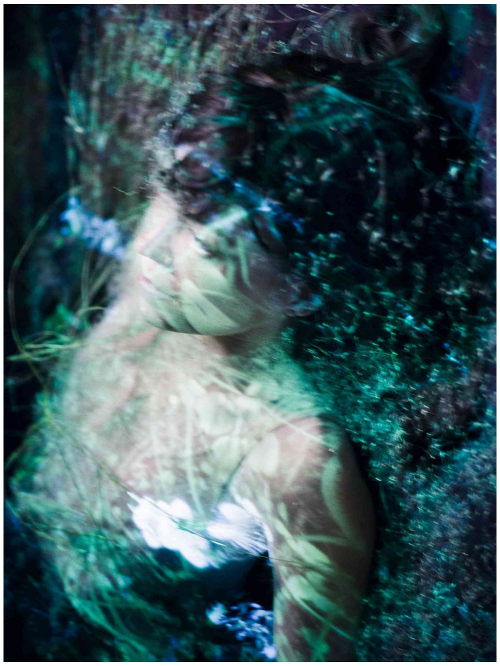
By Isaac Chotiner

Fiction

- **“My Wonderful Description of Flowers”**

My Wonderful Description of Flowers

By [Danielle Dutton]



Audio: *Danielle Dutton reads.*

Last night my husband dreamed I left him, though my husband never dreams, or if he does he dreams of nothing—of sending an e-mail, petting the cat. "I live not in dreams but in contemplation of a reality that is perhaps the future," Rilke, and not my husband, said. My husband brought up his dream over breakfast, but I had an early day, errands, a million meetings. I was almost out the door.

Later, on my way back home, I'm waiting for a westbound train, shifting a bag of groceries, when someone texts me a clip, so I tap my screen to watch. In it a man in a dark-blue suit steps up to a waiting group. His back is to the camera. He's speaking to a woman and a tall red-headed man—greeting them, or thanking them, or telling them goodbye. The clip is shaky, blurred. Someone made it by holding a phone in front of a TV screen. I can just make out the ticker; I catch "Iowa" and "White House." Then the man in the suit reaches out to touch the woman's arm. The woman steps away. I watch the clip again. It's not five seconds long. The man in the suit steps up to the group. He tries to touch her face. Not her arm, her face. The woman steps

away. People are getting off the train. People are getting on. I have no idea who sent the clip. There's a number but no name.

Now comes a *coincidence*. There's a man on this train with a too loud voice, a man in a dark-blue suit. At first he seems jolly, drunk. The westbound train goes "Haaaaaaaaaaa." He's friends with the whole world until he zeroes in on me. "Hello, wife," he says, taking steps in my direction. The train car lurches left. Then with a flash like a magic trick he produces a golden credit card and pops it in front of my face. He raises his eyebrows. Am I impressed? "This is my wife," he tells the train, but commuters stare out windows at the passing backs of mansions. The sun has nearly set. When we plunge into a tunnel he lifts that credit card up, high above my head. "The life breath of man is the lamp of the Lord," he says, his voice suddenly sonorous, his golden card a lantern now to guide us in the dark. Then the train comes to a stop. The doors slide open, but I don't move. But then I do, I run. I'm halfway out. I've timed it well. The doors are about to close. But the man in the suit is quick. His thinning hair and reek of booze. His hand is on my arm. "Hey," I say. But no one looks. I tear myself away. "Goodbye, wife," he calls. "I'll catch you another time."

Danielle Dutton on what a narrative can hold.

Emerging from the station, I step inside the rain. I step into a cloud. All around, it smells like trees. Impossible not to picture a forest in the fog, but there's no forest here. I'm still holding the bag of groceries. I can still feel the palm of his hand. Then all the way up the hill to my house I assume he is inside—my actual husband, I mean, and I am his actual wife. Our child will be inside as well, no doubt on their computer, their bedroom window aglow. But when I arrive the windows are dark. I can't unlock the door. Then I unlock it and flip on the light. I call both their names up the stairs.

Two weeks before any of this, I stepped onto another train and smiled at a pale young man gripping the metal bar. This was the morning rush hour. There was nowhere else to stand. As soon as the doors slid shut, the young man started to talk. He never stopped, under his breath, just stared at my stomach, my dress: "So nice, so nice, so nice." Describing it later, I laughed, but my husband was not amused. "I'm not laughing," I told him, even though I was. A few days later I saw the young man again, I saw his picture,

I mean, a shot from a doorbell camera, while scrolling the neighborhood app. He'd assaulted a woman not four blocks away, or tried to, on her porch steps, having followed her from the train.

Now I am home and my family is not. I leave my husband a voice mail. "Hey, where are you?" I say.

For weeks my child has been obsessed with a video game called Daphne. In Daphne you're on an island. You're a man who has lost something, and you wander around the island muttering to yourself. The island is beset by mist. The mist sprouts seabirds, cliffs. Go left down a path to the ocean. Turn right through a doorway and descend a flight of stairs. There's something else there: moaning. From somewhere deep inside, the island is trying to speak. To get closer to the source, you enter a dark cave. The farther in you go, the more you're able to see; the walls of the cave are glowing blue with something alive or dead. You can just make out your booted feet. The moaning grows louder. Yet the first-person player's muttering can be heard above everything else, his footsteps on the rocky path, my child alone in their room. I hear it like a song at night: mutter, moan, and step.

But now their computer is sleeping. I shut a bedroom window. Then I go downstairs and open the door and call for the cat in the fog.

In a book I've been reading about a painter in the early twentieth century, there's a passage about how she, the painter, Paula, liked to be alone: newly married, thus newly renamed, whenever her husband, Otto Modersohn, went away on a trip, she'd paint and paint and paint, and at whatever hour she liked she'd stop to eat and would not set the table. No candles. No meat. At dinner she'd read Goethe with rice pudding. "Half of me is still Paula Becker," she wrote, "and the other half is acting as if it were." But since I have to be on campus by eight, into the shining microwave I toss a frozen burrito. Then I text my husband: "I am not *leaving* I have to go to work."

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Danielle Dutton read "My Wonderful Description of Flowers."

The street lamps in the mist are wild pearls of light. I nod at a passing neighbor, walk down a half-hidden path. I cross a six-lane street. Next

comes the row of campus garages wrapped with metal screens—everything is sculpture, maybe—which ripple and clink in the wind. Here is the staircase lined with dogwoods, which blossom-tunnels each spring, and then I pass the gates of the Experimental Prairie. I stop beside a bench. "Hello where are you?" I text. A plastic sign near the concrete path introduces the grasses by name. *Sideoats grama. Fowl Manna*. "The cluster of flowers," it says, "is called an inflorescence." Most of the plants come up to my chest, but here and there a thistle rises high above everything else, its bulbous purple head atop a thin green stalk. The tallest thistle brings to mind a camera, possibly alive, a sentient alien technology transmitting news of Earth. "Cursed is the ground because of you," God allegedly said. "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow." But I often feel like a thistle myself, a bulbous inflorescence, transmitting news of Earth.

Inside the lecture hall the walls are lined with latecomers who couldn't get a seat, and between these standing people are paintings from the eighties by a former professor's wife, the people in them color-blocked and bent. The visiting writer is celebrated. Tens of thousands *follow* her. She takes a sip as people watch. Then she clears her throat. She places her glass on the lectern, but she sets it down in such a way that her face is inside the water. That is, from where I sit in the room, the water in the cup contains her entire face. Anyway, I think, they're probably back by now, with homework spread out on the table, and, I hope, feeding the cat. "You need to get back to me please," I type, then set my phone to silent. The visitor begins. She's reading us a story about a woman on a trip. The woman has lost her glasses in a desolate public space. A stranger, a man, offers to help. He leads her down a sidewalk. It's starting to get dark, but the two continue to walk. Someone beside me sneezes. I quickly slip back in. The story is like a spell. There's a road, a woman, upheaval. They skirt a grassy strip. Soon the man is telling the woman she has no one to trust but him.

Meanwhile, the man in Daphne has probably killed his wife. That is the player's backstory, which you piece together from his muttered fragments as you wander across the island. "The man," my husband explained one night, "killed his wife drunk driving." "No," our child said, "it's that you asked another man to drive you home from a party, and it was that man who was drunk, and then there was a crash, but only Daphne died." Go left and you were the driver; turn right and you made a choice that caused your wife to

die. Continue straight on the forking path and you'll approach a garden wall. It's a garden in the mist, a former garden, overgrown, and perched atop a cliff. But even within the garden walls you must listen to his muttering, contemplate his regret. He is sorry, he is suffering, that much is perfectly clear. You pass driftwood crosses, orange poppies, clumps of yellow gorse. The sky is like a painting. You approach the edge of the cliff. "It's a graphic masterpiece," my child said, quoting an online review.

Something is waiting to happen, I think. This is just the lull.

What happens after a reading is called a *wine reception*. Mostly there is cheese. To my left a grad student persists: " . . . with Cate Blanchett and the interviewer says, 'Where do kindness and compassion exist, in your opinion,' and, like, 'Where do you locate a sense of a moral compass, in this brutal world, or whatever,' and Cate Blanchett says, 'It's in my vagina.' " My office is steps away, which means I can feign a reason, I can slip through the door and hide. Still, I hear their voices. I don't turn on the light. The window is black like beads of jet and I am the shape of a nightgown. I turn off my phone and turn it back on, but this produces no new texts, no e-mails, and no missed calls. So I rehearse what I've been told: I've been told that I worry too much. I've been told that I resist *trusting the signs* when things are going O.K. But when are things ever O.K.? Bad things, I know, enormously bad, are happening all the time. And the little things add up, like my kid spending recess alone, again, eating alone at lunch, or how distracted my husband has been, how lately he shifts his face so I'm kissing only his cheek, or how he keeps forgetting to bolt the back door even though he knows the doorknob lock is broken, so I'm regularly coming home to a house that's been unlocked for hours, meaning anybody walking past might have stepped inside our kitchen, fingered the photos on our fridge, sneaked down into the basement—

A colleague calls my name. The crowd in the hallway has shrunk. The table is strewn with strawberry stems, and I have been invited; everyone is heading first to the train and then to a favorite bar.

"I'll walk as far as the fountains," I say, "but then I have to go home."

The bright lights from the stadium make the thick fog look like water, like a lake over our heads. I imagine I hear it lapping, but that's probably someone's *shoe*. As we pass two cops on bicycles, I stumble on the path, typing my husband an e-mail, while a grad student is saying, "That thing you brought up in class," reaching out a steadying arm, "about not really having, like, one authentic voice." The fountains are just ahead, lit up in the dark, where the path beneath our feet branches out in three directions. I should take the path that leads to the road that leads to the hill to my house. But I stay with the group. I don't split off. I'm talking to my student, answering him with words. I let myself be pulled along, past the fountains with water like glass, into the station elevator, out onto the platform. As the eastbound train arrives with a hiss, I'm approaching my house in my mind: down the path, up the street, but all the windows are dark. I try it again and again—down the path, up the street—but nobody is home.

Four weeks ago this Sunday I was sitting in front of my laptop when a message popped up from a *friend*. He'd be passing through the city and did I want to get together in the early afternoon. "Sorry," I typed back. "I'm going to a pumpkin patch, if you can believe it, with a bunch of kids from my kid's school." I noticed then that this same person had messaged me over the summer, after I'd posted about being somewhere teaching a summer class. He'd gone to college in the area, he'd said. "It's my first time here," I'd written back. "Yes," I agreed, "it's beautiful." He mentioned the currents, the air, how good his body felt whenever he was there. The town was on the ocean and there were clumps of bright-pink sweet peas on the sides of all the roads. I'd forgotten this exchange, but now I remembered that, even then, I hadn't been able to place him. I'd just thought I recognized his name. I remembered now, too, how typing *sweet peas* had felt flirtatious, alone as I was in that other place, speaking privately with a man, though perhaps that feeling had more to do with how intensely I'd admired the flowers, and again I'd assumed he was someone I'd corresponded with before. But now I checked and he was not. I didn't seem to know him, and I was unsure how or why he thought that he knew me. Still, I figured, he must. Another message sounded. "Which pumpkin patch?" it said. I didn't respond. Minutes later: "Do you know where the pumpkin patch is?" Then: "Can you send directions?" "Sorry," I finally wrote, "I don't know where it is. I'm not driving." This was true. "I have to go," I said, and I shut my laptop and went downstairs and listened to the news. A billionaire was in outer space. The

three hundredth mass shooting of the year had just occurred. An individual in Afghanistan had survived a drone attack.

Two hours later there was a knock on our front door. My husband and I were playing cards. “You get it,” I said, and I stepped into the kitchen. How could I have known? Obviously, I couldn’t. But I hadn’t told my husband about the messages from that summer, or the ones that morning. What was there to tell? I heard the stranger say my name. I heard him say, “She knows me.” I shook my head in the kitchen. My husband asked him to wait. “It’s fine,” I said. “I’ll talk to him.” “Who is this guy?” he said. “I don’t really know,” I answered. I slipped on my shoes and stepped outside. The stranger was alone on the porch. He looked at me as though he knew me. He smiled and looked away. I could sense my husband inside the house, passing behind the walls.

But nothing bad happens in Daphne. It’s always only lull. No puzzle to solve, no objective, no end. There’s only the space of the player’s despair—his constant talk, that muttering—and how you manage to feel, or where you manage to go inside the landscape of his mood.

“I don’t know him,” I said, “I don’t know why he came here, I have no idea how he found our house.” It sounded like a lie, though it almost entirely wasn’t. My husband went into the yard to make sure that the stranger had gone, but even at that moment there was a message on my phone. He could tell I’d been happy to see him, he wrote, because I’d been so nice. Another message would follow without a response from me, and then another, and others, their tone increasingly hostile, yet the officer we’d speak with would tell us there was nothing the police could do without a *credible threat*. Then back there in the moment a minivan pulled up. “Time to go,” I called, and my kid came bounding down the stairs pulling on their jacket.

I’ve never been out this far.

When everyone else got off for the bar, I stayed where I was, seated on the train. My students called out as the doors shut, and I watched them slide away. I wasn’t alone on the train. There were passengers seated or standing nearby, and the driver sat at the front. “This is an eastbound train,” she said, and passengers got off, but nobody got on. When we finally emerged

aboveground, the train was nearly empty. I watched the passing city lights and thought about the story that the visiting writer had read. The woman in it could hardly see. She was moving down the road, scared but also desperate, for all her own good reasons, moving toward something bad. But plot is so seductive. You don't really want it to stop. Or you don't know how to stop it. Then I realized the fog was gone. We were high up on a bridge, high above the river. Had the river swallowed the fog? But the river looked like nothing. It looked like empty space. Still, I knew it was down there, filled with fish and mud.

I'd e-mailed. I'd called. I'd texted so many times. When we cross this bridge, I thought, we'll be in a different state. Then we crossed the bridge. We passed a bright casino and a darkened R.V. park, then empty houses with missing bricks, then a house with missing bricks and a catalpa tree inside it. Then the train kept going, going and going and going through what seemed like more of nothing but must have been one enormous farm after another.

One afternoon last winter, my husband and child rode this train just to see where it ended. Despite the darkness, I can see now that it looks just as they described: a single track in a parking lot surrounded by fields of hay. There's one other passenger left on the train. I follow as she disembarks. She carries a sweatshirt, a purse. She seems to know where she's going. I follow her down the ramp. She pretends she doesn't see me, but I follow her all the way. I'm bad at talking to strangers, unless they ask for help. She doesn't ask for help, or even turn around. She hurries toward a gray sedan, the only car in the lot. It reminds me of something I read once, but only distantly remember, about a woman who couldn't sleep. She hadn't slept for weeks. One night she drove to a train station and parked in the empty lot. She sat inside her car. It was hard to tell, as a reader, if she had fallen asleep at last or not when her car began to shake. She dropped the keys by her feet in fear. Someone was outside her car, rocking it back and forth. Now the woman slams her door. She looks at me through the window. She starts the gray sedan. I watch her drive away. I cross the empty lot. At the line where the lot turns into the field, I take my phone out of my pocket. There's no service, which means no message, and the battery is low. It's a relief just to leave it on the ground.

In her film "The Beaches of Agnès," almost at the start, Agnès Varda says to the camera that if we opened up people's bodies we would find landscapes inside. If you opened my body, she says, you would find beaches in me. Having crossed the field with its rolls of hay, then passed through a tangle of woods, I've come to some other place, where the grass looks like a sea. The wind moves through the grasses, and I move through them, too. At first the grasses come up to my knees, and then after a minute they rise as high as my head. Other things surround me, too: star-shaped flowers in yellow and white, plastic netting, purple thistle, milkweed gone to seed. If you opened up my body, I think, this is what you'd find, exactly the place where I'm standing. There's a cross-rhythm from the crickets, plus the hum of distant traffic, plus the sound of drying grasses moving in the wind. My body's obscured by the waving of plants. This is the prairie at night. All you can see is darkness now and millions of flowers like stars. ♦

By Cressida Leyshon

By Ishion Hutchinson

By Jay Katsir

By Martín Espada

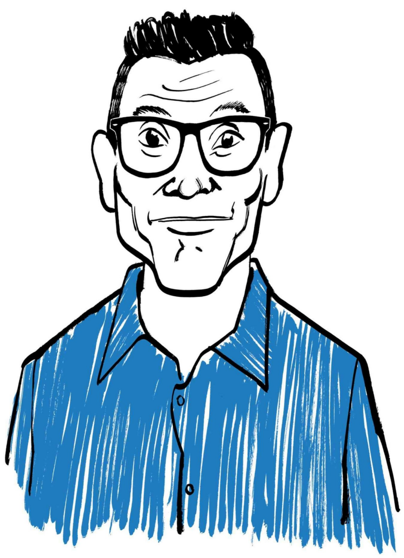
Life Lessons

- **[Steve-O Appreciates Fine Art]**

Steve-O Appreciates Fine Art

Stephen Glover, of “Jackass” fame, does one of his most surprising stunts yet: visiting the Whitney, where he discusses the wisdom dispatched in his memoir “A Hard Kick in the Nuts.”

By Dan Greene



In the nineteen-twenties, while living in Paris, the artist Alexander Calder fashioned a miniature circus from commonplace materials (wire, cloth, bottle caps) which he used for putting on shows for avant-garde confrères (Miró, Duchamp, Mondrian). The other day, Stephen Glover, who does modern-day variety-show stunts (tightrope walking over an alligator pit, snorting wasabi, using a beehive as a tetherball) with his buddies (Knoxville, Danger Eren, Wee Man) as Steve-O in the “Jackass” franchise, sat in a darkened room in the Whitney Museum, watching a recording of one of Calder’s productions. Glover, a professionally trained circus clown, raised his eyebrows. “Every time I see Cirque du Soleil I find myself, like, tearing up,” he said, his familiar rasp lowered to a stage whisper. “I’m just so moved by how fucking incredible humans can be.” He smiled impishly. “This is not making me feel that way.”

Glover was in town for the book tour of his second memoir, "A Hard Kick in the Nuts," and he'd been persuaded to kill an afternoon at the museum. (His living room in Los Angeles contains a cherished Calder print.) He'd brought along his fiancée, the production designer and stylist Lux Wright, and their latte-colored service dog, Wendy, who'd walked in docilely on a gray Ultimate Fighting Championship collar and leash. "Wendy's a mix," Glover explained. "Belgian Malinois and Xanax." Glover, who is forty-eight, wore a red corduroy button-down and black Ray-Bans and, among the art, had the expression of a bird who'd accidentally flown indoors. He peered at a placard denoting the dates bookending Georgia O'Keeffe's life. "Wow," he said. "Almost a hundred years old."

He settled in a bright side room exhibiting a collection of black-and-white Hazel Larsen Archer photos. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor played from a nearby film installation. Glover explained that the memoir was a companion to his comedy show "The Bucket List Tour," a combination of standup and explicit clips. (He'll play at the Town Hall this week.) He opens the show feigning distress—"I'm in a really fucked-up situation: I'm Steve-O in my forties"—and his initial idea for the book was a guide to middle age. "Ultimately, I thought it would serve to alienate my considerably younger audience," he said. "I'm like Matthew McConaughey," he added, referring to the actor's "Dazed and Confused" sleazebag character. "I get older, they stay the same age."

The memoir instead became a book of general wisdom, drawn from his fourteen years of sobriety and the regret-laden bacchanalia that preceded them. He never expected to live long enough to learn so many lessons. "Mortality and aging in general is a motherfucker for anybody," Glover said. "But it feels particularly hard for me, because I've always made a living being childish." As an actual child, he used outrageous stunts—shotgunning a saltshaker, pulling his own teeth—to endear himself to classmates. It often backfired. "It wasn't like, 'Wow, look how cool Steve is!' " Glover said. "It was more like, 'That's creepy and weird.' "

In the next room, his face lit up. On the far wall was Jay DeFeo's "The Rose," an eleven-foot grayscale starburst of oil, wood, and mica. "*That's* cool," he said. He glanced approvingly at the broad black-on-white strokes

of Franz Kline's "Mahoning" and, in the next room, Claes Oldenburg's oversized foam cigarette butts. "We've stumbled upon a dope floor," he said.

Wendy tugged onward. Conversation turned to the "Bucket List" stunt of greatest permanence—an on-camera vasectomy. "The footage was totally underwhelming," Glover said. More rewarding were scenes of him defying doctors' rest orders in the surgery's immediate aftermath by riding a horse bareback and serving as a human piñata. The climactic reveal: an appendage bruised brutally purple. "Thank *God*," Glover said. "Without that, it would have been a failure. I got really lucky." He noted that Wright considered the vasectomy the best gift he'd ever given her. "That's true," she said. She was less thrilled about the show-closing segment Glover has called the "crown jewel" of his career: a filmed act of onanism at fifteen thousand feet, performed after he leaped nude from an airplane. (He dubbed the stunt "Skyjacking.") Wright refused her endorsement. "Until I saw the show," she said. "Then I was, like, O.K., this is hilarious."

Sunlight glowed low through a nearby window. A guard announced that it would soon be closing time. Glover seemed ready to go. He discussed his idea for a museum of his own, showcasing mementos of his career, such as the cheetah-print bikini bottom he wore in countless "Jackass" bits, or the scorched T-shirt in which he was badly burned while performing "fire angels" on a floor covered with rocket fuel. The attraction would share billing with a sprawling animal sanctuary that he and Wright are planning, on a compound where the two would live, inspired partly by a recent visit to Elvis Presley's estate, in Memphis. "It might be a little on the nose," Glover said, "but I kinda wanna call it Disgraceland." ♦

By Ian Crouch

By David Remnick

By Lauren Collins

By The New Yorker

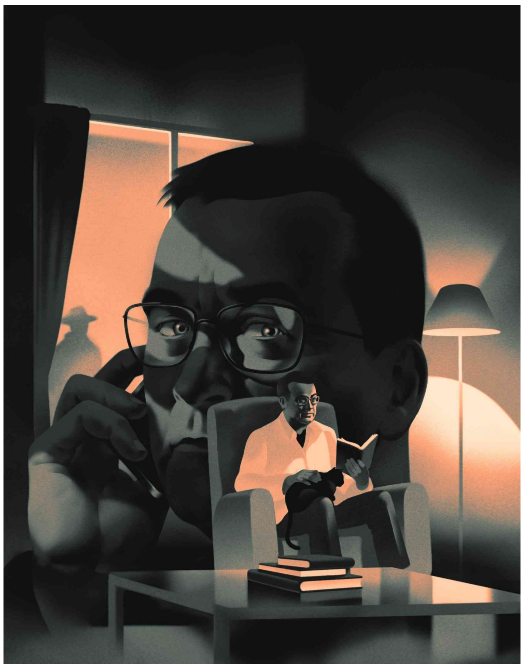
Life and Letters

- Is Mick Herron the Best Spy Novelist of His Generation?

Is Mick Herron the Best Spy Novelist of His Generation?

In his “Slough House” thrillers, the screwups save the day—and there’s a very fine line between comedy and catastrophe.

By Jill Lepore



Mick Herron is a broad-shouldered Englishman with close-cropped black hair, lightly salted, and fine and long-fingered hands, like a pianist’s or a safecracker’s. He wears wire-rimmed glasses, and he is shy and flushes easily, pink as a peony. He does not drive a car and he does not own a smartphone, and, in the softly carpeted apartment in Oxford where, wearing woollen slippers, he writes spy novels—the best in a generation, by some estimations, and irrefutably the funniest—he does not have Wi-Fi. He used to be a copy editor. He has never been a secret agent, except insofar as all writers are spies and maybe, lately, so is everyone else.

Spy fiction got good and going in the years before the First World War, and took flight afterward. In 1927, W. Somerset Maugham wrote “Ashenden: or, The British Agent,” about a writer who is recruited into British intelligence by a handler called R. During the war, Maugham had been a spook; he was

recruited after “Of Human Bondage” came out. Writers make good joes (as Herron might say): they’re keen observers, and they tend to know languages. (Maugham had French and German.) “If you do well you’ll get no thanks,” R. tells Ashenden, “and if you get into trouble you’ll get no help.” Editors say the same thing to writers.

Maugham’s best-known successors—Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, and John le Carré—were spies, too. Greene worked for M.I.6, Britain’s foreign-intelligence service; Fleming for Naval Intelligence; and le Carré for both M.I.6 and M.I.5, Britain’s security service. Like le Carré, whose wordcraft about spycraft included “mole,” “spook,” and “Moscow rules,” Herron’s got his own lingo, about “the hub” and “dogs” and “tiger teams” and “milkmen.” But Herron, as he himself might put it, has never been to joe country and lives nowhere near Spook Street.

For the longest stretch of Herron’s professional life, he worked in London in the legal department of an employment-issues research firm, copy-editing journal articles, handbooks, and case reports about employment discrimination and wrongful termination. Nights, he wrote detective fiction, and even got some published, but no one bought it. Then he had a breakthrough. “People say write what you know,” Herron says. “So I wrote about people who are failures.” Bob Cratchitting away at job-discrimination case reports, Herron came up with the idea of Slough House, a place where M.I.5 puts bad spies out to pasture. “Sack the useless, and they took you to tribunal for discriminating against useless people,” one character explains. “So the Service bunged the useless into some godforsaken annex and threw paperwork at them, an administrative harassment intended to make them hand in their cards. They called them slow horses. The screw-ups. The losers.” James Bond they are not.

The Slough House novels have been adapted as an Apple TV+ series called, like the first of those novels, “Slow Horses.” It’s slick and sleek and as star-studded as a summer sky. The first season came out last spring, and the second begins this month. Mick Jagger, a Mick Herron fan, recorded its bluesy theme song, “Strange Game.” Kristin Scott Thomas stars as Diana Taverner, Second Desk at M.I.5, with Jonathan Pryce as her long-retired predecessor, David Cartwright, whose grandson River Cartwright, played by the Scottish actor Jack Lowden, is a slow horse trying to kick over the

traces. The cast is headed by the inimitable Gary Oldman, as Jackson Lamb. Lamb is an old joe who's straight out of Dickens, if Dickens had ever invented a character who used the word "twat" all the time.

Even before John le Carré died, nearly two years ago, people had started calling Mick Herron his heir, which is, as publicists say, very selling, but also something of a burden. Herron suspects that le Carré would find his work facetious. Still, that's not to say there aren't similarities. A decade ago, Oldman was nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal of le Carré's George Smiley in an adaptation of "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy." Oldman says Jackson Lamb is Smiley if everything had gone wrong, although, arguably, everything has.

"Tonight at ten, chaos on all fronts for Liz Truss," the BBC announced the night I boarded a red-eye to London. "ITV News at Ten" summed up the day's high jinks in Westminster a little more colorfully: "The deputy chief whip was reported to have left the scene saying, 'I'm absolutely F-ing furious, I just don't F-ing care anymore,' before he resigned, along with the chief whip. But we've just been told they have now officially unresigned. The home secretary has, however, definitely gone." On Channel 4, one presenter was heard off camera calling a fervent Brexiteer a "cunt." Welcome to Jackson Lamb's Britain.

I took a bus from Heathrow to Oxford, a city of sandcastles. Herron and his partner, Jo Howard, picked me up by the side of the road in her black Volvo. I was two hours late. It was raining.

"I'm so sorry we've missed the morning," I said, climbing into the back seat: black, white topstitching.

"Not to worry," Howard said, pulling into traffic as zippy-fast as a taxi-driver.

"We'll pop over to the house for a bit and then head out?" Herron asked, looking back at me, wonderingly, black bushy eyebrows raised, a pair of commas. I'd barged in on what was meant to be a weekend getaway to the Malvern Hills with Howard's two grown daughters. They had graciously agreed to let me tag along as far as a book event in Herefordshire, after

which Herron and I would take a train back to Oxford, and then he'd turn around and train back out to meet Howard for what was left of the weekend. Howard downshifted for power, weaved left, weaved right, leaned into a turn on rain-soaked streets. She has corn-silk-yellow hair, pale, delicate features, and, faintly, freckles, and she drives, I decided, not like a taxi-driver but like a cop on a cop show circa 1972. Maybe Michael Douglas in "The Streets of San Francisco."

Herron and Howard live in a brick row house with two white-socked tortoiseshell tabby cats so handsome they could be cat-food models. Howard is an executive-search consultant—O.K., a headhunter—for the publishing industry. It's her house. The walls are lined with shelves jammed with hardcover books, alphabetized. Herron moved in during the pandemic. "Boris Johnson said no one could go out," Howard explained. "So Mick said, 'I guess I'd better move in.' " He kept his flat, though, a ten-minute walk away, and he writes there every weekday, padding around the carpet as soundlessly as Hercule Poirot.

"I'll make some coffee," Howard announced, and set about clanking away in the kitchen.

In a sitting room that opens out to a magical back garden, Herron and I sat down each to a sofa, one red, one off-white, like valentines. The cats have their own door, a tunnel through the wall and out to the garden, where they pounce on mice scurrying between potted geraniums and glower at squirrels scrabbling up the clematis that's strangling a slatted wooden fence. Herron was wearing a black button-up shirt over a gray tee, and jeans, and had swapped out black sneakers for slippers at the door. A lot of people had told me that, notwithstanding his denials, Herron must at some point have been a spy. I wasn't seeing it, but he's for sure more of a listener than a talker, and he'd be excellent undercover, a man on tiptoe, cat-footed.

Herron was born in Newcastle, one of six children of an optician and a nursery-school teacher. He read whatever he could get his hands on when he was a kid, climbing the shelves from Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald to Agatha Christie and Dick Francis, and then to Dickens, Austen, and John O'Hara.

"I was addicted to narrative," he said, pouring out a cup of coffee. "Especially short stories—mainlining." He went to Oxford, studied English, got a job in a library, and wrote poetry. Then his verse dried up. He decided to try crime fiction. He read everything. "I was attracted by the idea of there being scaffolding." He liked the structure, like a sonnet, or a sonata.

One of the cats appeared out of nowhere. Through the tunnel? There was much talk of the kittens, their kittenish ways.

"Fair description of a weekend is me sitting around talking about the kittens," Herron said.

"I'll just run up to finish packing," Howard called, dashing up the stairs.

He'd written reams of pages only to destroy them. "My early narrators were fairly hapless, useless men," he recalled. Then he came up with Sarah Tucker, a bored and frustrated out-of-work lawyer living in South Oxford, ambivalent about having children and married to a creep. When a house on Sarah's street blows up and everyone blames a faulty gas line, she decides to investigate, aided, eventually, by a take-no-prisoners private eye named Zoë Boehm, who runs a detective agency with her hapless and useless but exquisitely sweet husband, Joe Silvermann. "I introduced Joe in order to kill him," Herron said, guiltily.

With le Carré, if you read him, you have to figure: here is a man who both hated and feared women. Not Herron, whose detective novels are very convincingly narrated by women. In his first book, "Down Cemetery Road" (2003), the action begins at a dinner party. Sarah's rotten husband has brought home annoying guests from work. Finally, they leave, and she's left to clean up:

> He'd cancel his subscription to the *Guardian* before using the phrase Women's Work, but he'd justify not helping her nevertheless. Hard day at the office; long journey back; had to stand all the way from Paddington. . . . And underneath that, no matter what kind of day he'd had, no matter what she'd said to whoever, there'd be that nasty little jingle that she heard all the time these days, although he'd yet to say it aloud:

—It’s not as if you do anything else. Is it, Sarah?

“It’s the most autobiographical thing I’ve ever written,” Herron said. A house on his street blew up. And he was Sarah: clever, curious, and painfully thwarted.

On July 7, 2005, as Herron was on his way to work, four suicide bombers set off bombs in London, three on subways and one on a bus. He got off the train at Paddington and was trying to get on the tube when he heard a mysterious sound, a muffled thump. Even before people knew what was going on, he said, “it was like the strange light you get before a storm.” The bombings helped persuade him to turn from detective fiction to spy fiction: bigger canvas, higher stakes.

He poured more coffee. He eyed the kittens. “I’m extremely aware that I’m not competent to write about global issues,” he said. “But one of the things I took from 7/7 is that you don’t have to be an expert to be implicated. We’re all implicated.”

He wrote a bridge novel, called “Reconstruction,” about a siege at a day-care center in South Oxford, which leads the local police to call in antiterrorist agents from M.I.5, including Bad Sam Chapman. (“That was just a name. He wasn’t that bad.”) Herron found that he enjoyed writing about spies. He liked le Carré’s term for them: “joes.”

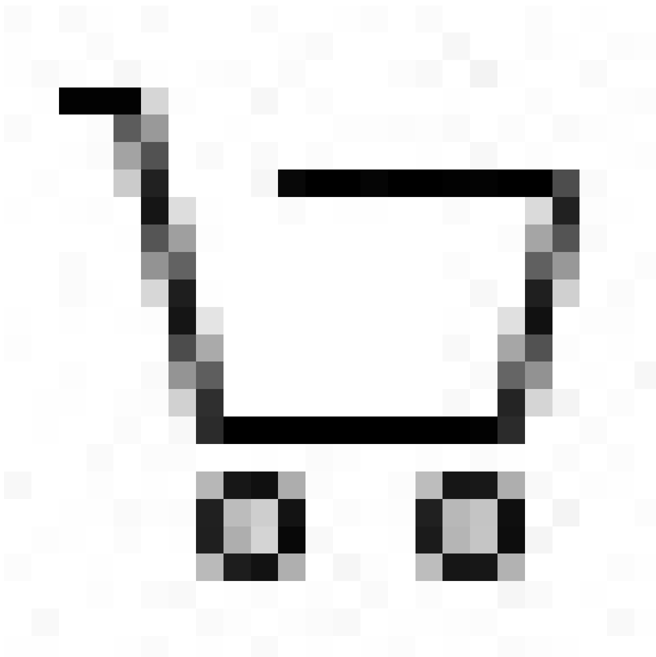


"I broke up with him because he wouldn't let me use LeonardsWiFi, only LeonardsWiFi-Guest."
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

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In 2008, he began writing “Slow Horses,” a ticking-clock political thriller in which white nationalists calling themselves the Sons of Albion kidnap a British Muslim standup comic and live-stream an announcement that they intend to cut off his head in forty-eight hours. The only M.I.5 agents who appear able to stop them are led by Jackson Lamb, a disgusting, lumpy, vulgar, chain-smoking Rabelaisian wreck of a man. “He’d been said to resemble Timothy Spall, with worse teeth,” Herron writes. (*Kirkus* once referred to him as “Flatulent Jackson Lamb,” but, truly, that’s not the half of it.) Herron’s Oxford mysteries had sold poorly in the United Kingdom and barely at all in the United States. His U.K. publisher, Constable & Robinson, was known for its village mysteries. It had not the least idea what to do with “Slow Horses.” And no one believed that white nationalists were anything to worry about.

The rain pelted the stone patio. Upstairs, Howard wrestled suitcases.

Herron read le Carré as a kid, and the slow-horses books are riddled with nods to the master. In le Carré’s novel “Smiley’s People,” there’s a slovenly, foul-mouthed taxi-driver named J. Lamb. Le Carré’s real name was David Cornwell, and David Cartwright might as well be le Carré himself. His grandson River calls him, affectionately, the O.B., the old bastard. He tells another joe about the books the O.B. used to read to him:

> “Conrad, Greene, Somerset Maugham.”
>
> “Ashenden.”
>
> “You get the picture. For my twelfth birthday he bought me le Carré’s collected works. I can still remember what he said about them.”
>
> *They’re made up. But that doesn’t mean they’re not true*.

“Have you ever met him?” I asked Herron, as Howard came down the stairs.

“I was in the same room with him once,” he offered. At a party.

“And you didn’t go say hello?”

He shook his head.

“Le Carré?” Howard piped up. “I’ve met him.” She’d been trying very hard to stay away, but it was nearly time to leave. “I sat next to him once, twice, at book events,” she said. “Oh, and I’ve got . . .” She crossed the room, pulled “The Night Manager” off a shelf, and flipped to the title page, signed “For Jo, from John le Carré,” and then opened her copy of “The Tailor of Panama,” inscribed “For Jo, really, with all good wishes, from David—really.” The old bastard.

Spy fiction flourished during the Cold War, but that war is over, and Mick Herron is a civilian, so far as anyone knows, writing about espionage in the age of terror: domestic surveillance, homeland security, CCTV, and taking your shoes off to get on an airplane. Le Carré wrote about Moscow rules; Herron added London rules. Moscow rules: watch your back. London rules: cover your ass. The Slough House books are haunted by the Cold War. Lamb is a service legend; at some point, he went undercover in Berlin, and there are veiled hints that he was captured and tortured by the Stasi. He has a mysterious history with the whip-smart Molly Doran, M.I.5’s archivist, who’s in a wheelchair: her legs got blown off. Lamb, differently damaged, came home, Herron writes, “in that blissful break when the world seemed a safer place, between the end of the Cold War and about ten minutes later.”

Le Carré's George Smiley embodied the Cold War-era decline of the British Empire—upright and betrayed, his disposition of quiet, keep-calm-and-carry-on forbearance a proxy for Britain itself. "Lamb's position is: I've had enough of this, so you can all fuck off," Herron says. Lamb is Britain in the age of Brexit: angry, embarrassed, and coming apart at the seams.

Herron cleared away the coffee crockery and came back from the kitchen with a handful of treats for the kittens. "Don't worry," he whispered to them, kneeling down. "We'll be back soon."

Howard rounded up jackets and car keys. Then she remembered one last thing, and switched on the television to set up Netflix for the cat-sitter. The BBC blinked on: a young, shaken reporter stood outside 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister was about to make an announcement. We sat back down on the sofas, gripped.

"Oi!" Jackson Lamb might have growled from his office on the top floor of Slough House, fishing a cigarette out of one pocket and a lighter out of another. "Tory Spice is on the telly!"

When Truss, at the age of forty-seven, became Prime Minister, *The Economist* predicted that she'd have "roughly the shelf-life of a lettuce," and a tabloid started a contest, live-streaming a head of iceberg and asking which would last longer. "You knew where you stood with the lettuce," Herron said.

Truss stepped up to the lectern and resigned, becoming the shortest-lived Prime Minister in British history. "Supermarket salad is crowned winner," the *Guardian* reported later that day. Herron stood up, sighed, and turned off the set.

"I'm a radical feminist, as you know," Lamb might have said, stubbing out his cigarette. "But the hot flashes always get these old girls in the end."

The road from Oxford to Ledbury is lined by drystone walls and black-faced sheep. For the longest time, Howard's car slogged along behind a sluggish gray truck with a single word painted on the back, in red: "Horses." Howard

thumped at the steering wheel, frustrated. “Slow horses,” Herron said, delighted.

Jackson Lamb loves all manner of wordplay. “It’s the only thing he takes pleasure in,” Herron tells me. In one scene, Lamb meets Molly Doran in a church and makes a fuss, moaning and groaning as he settles, wearily, into a pew. Doran turns her wheelchair around to face him:

> “Limbs giving you trouble?” she asked, with a hint of sarcasm.
>
> “You don’t know the half of it.” He paused. “I said—”
>
> “I get it.”
>
> “Because you’ve only got half the—”
>
> “I get it.”

Lamb owes as much to P. G. Wodehouse as he does to le Carré; he’s got something of the extremity of Gussie Fink-Nottle, Stilton Cheesewright, and Lord Emsworth. The *Wall Street Journal* compared Herron to Evelyn Waugh. Herron also pays his dues to Dickens, referring, at one point, to Lamb’s secretary, Catherine Standish, as Miss Havisham. Or consider this:

> It’s said of Churchill that he’d catnap in an armchair with a teacup in his hand, and when he dropped off the noise of the cup hitting the floor would wake him. He claimed this was all the rest he needed. Jackson Lamb was much the same, the difference being he used a shot glass rather than a teacup and didn’t wake when it fell. Catherine would sometimes find him in the morning, sprawled on his chair like a misplaced squid, the air smelling like water from a vase of week-old flowers.

To play Lamb, Gary Oldman told me, “all I’ve had to do is follow the signposts.” But it’s a brilliant, unmissable performance. He loves playing Lamb. “Me walking around with my greasy hair and my crumpled overcoat,” he said, laughing. “It’s delicious.” He sees Smiley and Lamb as connected: “They’re both disgusted, and they both want to walk away. But they’re addicted, *addicted* to this life.”

Slough House is bleaker than Bleak House. Also, as readers are told, “Slough House is not in Slough, nor is it a house.” It’s just so far from everything else that it might as well be in Slough. It is, in fact, in London, on Aldersgate Street, next to a Chinese takeout and near the Barbican tube station. (Herron used to walk down Aldersgate on his way to work.) You can find it on Google Maps. “Equally as important as Holmes 221b Baker St. and platform 9¾ at King’s Cross,” an online review read.

“A double yolker!” Herron and Howard shouted out as we passed a pub.

“What?”

“Two yellow cars,” Herron explained.

Yellow car is a game the slow horses play when they’re very, very bored. You see a yellow car and you say, “Yellow car.” Unless, apparently, you see two.

Slough House / slow horses: that’s just plain wordplay. But to see only the wordplay in Herron’s writing is to miss the lyricism: “The owl flew screaming from the barn, its wingtips bright with flame. For a moment, silhouetted against the blank sky, it was a dying angel, scorched by its own divinity, and then it was just a sooty husk, dropping like an anvil into the nearby trees.” And to focus on the horsing around is to miss the terror. Diana Taverner—“Lady Di,” behind her back—is as fierce and cunning as le Carré’s Karla. She “wore her authority as she might an ermine gown: it kept her warm, and people noticed it.” In one scene, a staffer tells her that an enemy agent has just been assassinated, on her orders:

> She took the tablet he offered, read the message on its screen, and smiled.
>
> “*Smiert spionam*,” she said.
>
> “ . . . Ma’am?”
>
> “Ian Fleming,” said Diana Taverner. “Means ‘Death to spies.’ ”
>
> And then, because he still looked blank, said, “Google it.”

Early on, when Boris Johnson was still the mayor of London, Herron often drew his characters from life:

> Fluffy-haired and youthful at forty-eight, and with a vocabulary peppered with archaic expostulations—Balderdash! Tommy-rot!! Oh my giddy aunt!!!—Peter Judd had long established himself as the unthreatening face of the old-school right, popular enough with the GBP [Great British Public], which thought him an amiable idiot, to make a second living outside Parliament as a rent-a-quote-media-whore-cum-quiz-show-panel-favourite, and to get away with minor peccadilloes like dicking his kids' nanny, robbing the taxman blind, and giving his party leader conniptions with off-script flourishes.

As the years have rolled by, Herron hasn't lacked for material.

"I've gotten some angry letters from people who accused me of having disdain for Trump," Herron said. "I think that's a misreading. I was going for contempt."

"There's a Donald Trump Junior?" Lamb asks, incredulous. "And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse."

In Ledbury, a half-timbered medieval market town in Herefordshire, Herron and Howard and I checked into the Feathers Hotel, built around 1565 on the post route from Cheltenham to Aberystwyth. In a lobby with antlers on the walls and overstuffed upholstered furniture, we met the writers Sarah Hilary and Andrew Taylor, along with Taylor's wife, Caroline. We were all going to have a quick dinner before heading to a discussion about crime writing, part of a series called "Ledburied."

We walked a few doors down to a posh Italian restaurant. The sun set as we pondered the menu.

"Wine?" Hilary asked, effervescent and organized.

"No wine," Taylor said. "We have to keep our heads."

It turns out that crime writers like Italian, especially risotto. Mostly, though, the talk was of agents and editors. When Herron first drafted "Slow Horses,"

he planned to blow up Slough House. (He kills off characters all the time: "It's not a thriller if it's not thrilling.") But then he decided he might want to stay a little longer in that house and reimagined the ending. The book came out in 2010; a couple of years later, he finished a sequel, "Dead Lions." This winter, it's Season 2 of the Apple series. At the time, however, he couldn't find a publisher in his own country.

He recalled, "One publisher asked, 'What even is this? Is it a thriller or is it a comedy?' Also, no one wanted to publish a sequel when they hadn't published the first book." Herron figured, O.K., I guess I'll never be a full-time writer. But then Juliet Grames, who runs the crime imprint at Soho, an independent American publisher, came along. "I read 'Dead Lions' and I said, 'We have to publish this,' " Grames told me. Soho bought the rights to "Slow Horses," too, but, she says, "we could not get people to listen to us about this guy." Then, in the U.K., Mark Richards, an editor at the distinguished press John Murray, happened to pick up a copy of "Slow Horses" at the Liverpool Street railway station. Richards's colleagues see him as the "furniture restorer," because he can look at an unloved, threadbare sofa and spot its quality. He bought the rights to the first two Slough House books. Not long afterward, Britons voted for Brexit and Americans elected Trump. Suddenly, Peter Judd and the Sons of Albion didn't seem so far-fetched. The *Daily Telegraph* dubbed "Slow Horses" one of the best spy novels ever written.

The risotto arrived. "P. D. James," Hilary began, "once showed up to a book event only to find the bookstore closed and on the locked door a sign reading —"

"Event cancelled for lack of interest," Herron finished.

"And that wasn't even at the start of her career," Taylor put in.

To be a writer of genre fiction is to belong to something akin to an honorable medieval guild. Taylor's newest book, "The Royal Secret," is the latest in his series of best-selling thrillers set in seventeenth-century London. When Herron was saddled with being called spy fiction's "best-kept secret," Taylor wrote a review in which he said that Herron writes like Raymond Chandler,

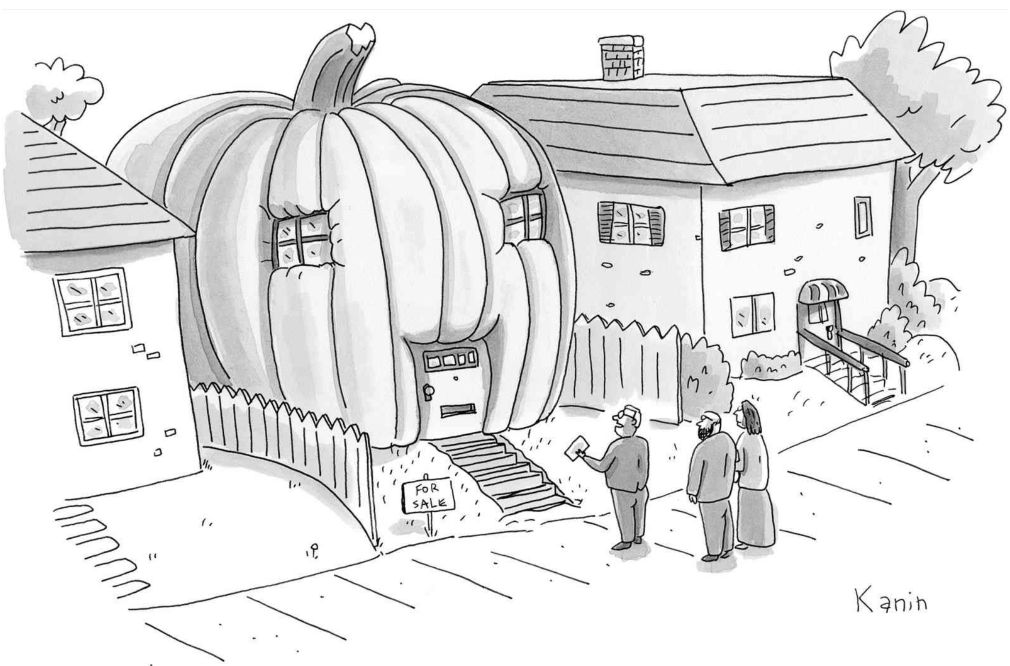
except better. Both Herron and Taylor blurbed Hilary’s spooky novel “Fragile.” Herron called it “a dark river.”

“Hey, I have my new book jacket!” Hilary remembered. She pulled out her phone to show us the spare and beautiful cover of “Blackthorn.” “They made it into two words,” she said. Everyone agreed that had been the right decision, design-wise.

“Don’t you people ever talk about bloody axes and fingerprints and serial killers?” I asked, disappointed.

“Once, someone collapsed while I was giving a reading,” Herron offered. “Or, no, that happened twice.” Fainted. “Or maybe he was asleep?” No one had died, though.

Hilary put down her fork. “People say it, but it’s true. Crime writers get all their gruesomeness out on the page. In person, they’re the nicest people.”



“Of course, you’d want to scoop out the insides.”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

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“It’s the romance writers you have to look out for,” Herron said. “Blood on the carpet, those people.”

After dinner, I followed them down a dark, cobbled alley and into Burgage Hall, a packed space noisy with clatter and gossip and smelling of woodsmoke and damp wool. Stacks of books were piled on folding tables where wine and juice had been poured into plastic cups. A lectern had been pushed to a corner. Old men unbuttoned their coats and doffed their caps; old women settled on seats. You could hear the squelch of muck boots and the chattering of knitting needles. “Secrets and Spies” was the evening’s theme. It might have been a garden-club meeting.

In the morning, Howard headed out to go hiking in the Malvern Hills, and Herron and I boarded a train to Oxford. We sat at a laminated table, face to face, watching rain streak the windows as we sped through the sodden countryside. “See It, Say It, Sorted,” the signs above every door read, flashing green pixels.

In the age of terror, everyone’s on the lookout, on trains, buses, and airplanes—not just under surveillance but conducting it. *If you see something, say something*. Lamb complains, “It’s like everyone’s a fucking spy.”

I’d listened to each of Herron’s novels as audiobooks, performed by wonderfully versatile actors, with AirPods in my ears. I’d felt like a secret agent, eavesdropping. (Julia Franklin, who recorded the Oxford series, and Gerard Doyle and Seán Barrett, who recorded the Jackson Lamb books, all told me they had to stop reading for laughing.) Reading Herron, or listening to him, is like riding on a carrousel and switching animals every time it goes around. You’re in one person’s head, and then you’re in someone else’s, except, unnervingly, you’re hardly ever in Lamb’s. He’s a cipher, forever undercover.

Every passenger who traipsed past us on the train, wetly squeezing down the aisle, was noted by Herron, absently, as if he were tucking them away in a catalogue of humanity. His slow horses come in every type, and they got kicked out of the service for every imaginable screwup. River Cartwright failed a training exercise. Min Harper left a disk labelled “Top Secret” on a train. Louisa Guy lost a gun seller she was tailing. Marcus Longridge, who is Black, is a gambler; and Shirley Dander, of ambiguous sexuality (don’t ask her), is a coke addict. Roderick Ho, a computer whiz played on the Apple series by Christopher Chung, got sent to Slough House because he’s a twit.

Ho is himself a kind of writer, an inventor of fictional worlds; it amazes him that he can "build a man from links and screenshots, launch him into the world like a paper boat, and he'd just keep sailing." Herron loves Ho, the spy writer lost in a world of his own invention. "There may come a point where I have to let him grow up a bit," he admitted, "but then I'd probably have to kill him."

The office banter is brutal: "While Louisa Guy has been known to speculate that Ho occupies a place somewhere on the right of the autism spectrum, Min Harper has habitually responded that he's also way out there on the git index." When Longridge insults Peter Judd and Dander warns him that he's using hate speech, Longridge snaps, "Of course it's hate speech. I fucking hate him."

"I've had readers who assume I'm waging a war against political correctness," Herron said, plainly exasperated. "I am not. I'm absolutely all for treating one another decently. I don't think Lamb's waging that war, either." Lamb's playing with words and taking the piss:

> "I let others do the spade work." He glanced at Marcus. "Just a phrase. Let's not involve the thought police."
>
> "We'd need a *SWAT* team," Marcus muttered.

Lamb's also trying to get the people who work for him to quit, because he's worried about them getting killed. Most of what he does is done to save them. When a bad actor sneaks into Molly Doran's Records Department and she orders him out and he says he doesn't "take instructions from a crip," Lamb finds the guy, breaks both of his legs, and asks him, "Who's the crip now?"

Herron's phone rang. It was Howard, calling to make sure we'd caught the train, and asking Herron if he could pick up some sneakers she'd forgotten at the house.

"Yes, yes," Herron said. "Bye, sweetheart." And to me: "It's too wet to go walking. She's gone to the shops." We stared out at the slashing rain.

Herron also loves writing Catherine Standish, to whom he's given the most fully developed backstory—a disordered and drunken past, fatally tied to Lamb's own darkest deeds. "She's more aware than any of the others how very badly her life could have gone," Herron said. "I have that sense about my own life."

In 2017, after the books began to take off, Herron quit his day job. Not long afterward, he went to a sales-and-marketing meeting at John Murray. The name of the series had been changed from the Slough House mysteries to the Jackson Lamb Thrillers. He was shown posters, ads, and merchandise, down to drink coasters printed with Lambisms: "*When am I not full of joie de fucking vivre*?"

"You do realize," Herron told the execs slowly, "that in the book I'm writing right now I kill him off?"

Silence. Fidgeting. More silence. "You're having us on, yeah?"

Splashing through flooded tracks, the train spluttered to a halt at Charlbury, a whistle-stop town on the edge of the Cotswolds about twenty minutes from Oxford. A few passengers got on, umbrellas trailing them like tails. The doors closed. The train sat still as stone, rain pattering, wind rattling. Eventually, over the speaker system the conductor said something that no one could understand for the static, leaving everyone as mystified as slow horses stuck on the underground. "Signalling problems," a character muses in the third of the Slough House books. "These were often caused by heat, when they weren't caused by cold, or by things being wet, or dry."

People started mumbling, grumbling, texting. Ten minutes in, the conductor's voice came back—hollering now—to announce that the brakes were stuck and that it would take at least an hour to get them unstuck. Brexit budget cuts?

Herron and I trudged out of the train and into the rain. The one-room station was closed. There were no buses into town, or anywhere. No Ubers, no Lyfts. No taxi stand. In slickers, we huddled under the station's overhanging roof with half a dozen other stranded passengers, including a rosy-cheeked young man and his father, wearing long woollen coats. They'd travelled

from Worcestershire, and the son, who couldn't have been much more than twenty, was on his way to London for a job interview, his first.

"You'll get there," Herron assured him. "What's the job?"

"Fund accountancy."

"Oh, right. Not to worry. It's not far. You'll be fine."

The job candidate nodded gratefully. Everyone tried calling taxi companies, using cell phones like road flares. No one answered. The rain picked up, and then the wind. It grew, suddenly, quite cold. We were late, we were soaked, and now we were freezing.

"When we get into Oxford," Herron told me, "I've arranged for you to be mugged. Then the food poisoning will kick in around four."

At last, a taxi pulled up. Two women dressed in fur coats and high boots emerged from the train, dry as toast, and climbed inside. Herron and the aspiring fund accountant's father dashed out into the rain and begged them to take one more passenger. The son squeezed into the back seat. Herron rapped the car window. "Good luck," he said. "You'll be great."

He ran back under the station roof, shivering.

Moscow rules: watch your back. London rules: cover your ass. Slough House rules: everywhere is joe country. Herron rubbed his hands for warmth and tried to wipe the raindrops from his glasses. My notebook was drenched. I asked him why he avoids writing from inside Jackson Lamb's head, and he said, "Because I don't want to break him." The rain fell like a veil. ♦

By Ted Geltner

By David Remnick

By Lauren Collins

By John Cassidy

Movies

- **The Revelatory Portraits of Paolo Di Paolo**

The Revelatory Portraits of Paolo Di Paolo

The new documentary "The Treasure of His Youth," directed by Bruce Weber, features interviews with the Italian photographer, whose subjects include Anna Magnani.



On the principle that it takes one to know one, Bruce Weber celebrates the extraordinary life and work of another photographer, the nonagenarian Paolo Di Paolo, in the documentary **"The Treasure of His Youth"** (opening on Dec. 9, at Film Forum). Starting in 1949, Di Paolo bore witness to social changes in postwar Italy and created revelatory portraits of some of its culture heroes, such as Anna Magnani and Pier Paolo Pasolini—and then, in 1968, abandoned photography. In interviews, Di Paolo displays a personality that's as original as his art.

By Vince Aletti

By Richard Brody

By David Owen

By Françoise Mouly

Poems

- **“The Frantic Adding Machine”**
- **“Law of the Body”**

By Simon Armitage

Audio: *Read by the author.*

The frantic adding machine
of a wasps' nest
in the eaves,

its fizzing pregnancy, thrilling
to lay an ear
to the plasterboard wall,

let its raving fusion
blur with the mind.
The waspman cometh

in T-shirt and shorts,
pumps white dust
under a roof tile

through an extendable wand.
Insecticide clings to fine hairs
on the legs and wings; panicked,

they ferry the powder
deeper and deeper
into the chambers and halls,

through cloisters
and vaulted naves,
all the way to the throne.

The collapsing sound
and sinking heat
of a city-state

as it empties and falls. On fire,
an ambulance rolls to a halt
on a soft verge;

the last Trojan child
totters in wooden clogs
through cobbled streets...

He takes the dead nests
into schools; kids squeal
at the monster’s skull

and the mausoleum
of opened brain,
poke crayons and felt pens

in the vacant tombs. I fit
the quelled attic
back on my head.

This is drawn from “New Cemetery.”

By Talia Argondezzi

By Robert Moor

By Danielle Dutton

By Martín Espada

By [Lizzie Harris]

Audio: *Read by the author.*

She who never wanted children who took pills not to have them who took pills when she feared she would she who waited for the right job the right partner the right moment to even open to the idea of them she who carried them she whose organs went two-dimensional to make space who grew a new organ whose own body bowed to the needs of the idea of something she who vomited every day for eleven weeks who travelled with sour candies in a bag until her tongue bled she who bled calmly on the phone with the doctor she who slept on the floor of an empty office she who lowered her doses of all the medicines that made her want to live in the first place she who fed the body that fed the body on nothing but raw corn and vitamins she who grew forty pounds and carried it to and from the bus to the subway to the walk to work and back again she who took a course on labor and labored for days she who heard the nurse say *perhaps she has a low tolerance for pain* and thought back to when a mirror shattered her body and her father unsure of how to stop the bleeding put her in two pairs of sweatpants until they soaked through she who knows punishment is always a negotiation of tolerance she who lost consciousness when the epidural did its job too well who stomached three shots of ephedrine to breathe again so the child inside could breathe again she who they raced into surgery whose abdomen was sawed through and stitched up she who held the baby covered in her own insides who itched for days from withdrawal who loved the baby instantly who fed the baby until she passed out who gave up sleep and time and mind and heart she who gave so generously of her body over and over only to have them say it was never hers to give

By Ava Kofman

By Stephania Taladrid

By Rachel Aviv

By Joshua Rothman

Profiles

- **The Enduring Metal Genius of Metallica**

By [Amanda Petrusich]

The merch preceded them. Forty-eight hours before Metallica performed in Las Vegas, restaurants and bars along the Strip were crammed full of pilgrims dressed in branded gear: T-shirts, jerseys, sweatshirts, sneakers, tank tops, hats, beanies, socks, wristwatches. The most grizzled devotees wore fraying denim vests decorated with several decades' worth of patches. Metallica's licensing team estimates that about a hundred and twenty million Metallica T-shirts have been sold since 1995. The motifs are iconic. There's the one where a hand clutching a dagger emerges from a toilet, alongside the phrase "Metal Up Your Ass." There's the one where a skull is wearing scrubs and performing brain surgery with a fork, a knife, and its fangs. There's the one where the skull has a fistful of stumpy straws and is announcing, "This shortest straw has been pulled for you!" You get the idea.

Metallica is now in its forty-first year. The band was a progenitor, along with Slayer, Anthrax, and Megadeth, of thrash, a subgenre of heavy metal marked by thick, suffocating riffs, played with astonishing speed. Lyrical themes include death, despair, power, grief, and wrath. Though metal is often dismissed as underground music—frantic, savage, niche—Metallica has sold some hundred and twenty-five million records to date, putting the band on par, commercially, with Bruce Springsteen and Jay-Z. It is the only musical group to have performed on all seven continents in a single calendar year. (In 2013, Metallica played a ten-song set in Antarctica for a group of research scientists and contest winners; because of the fragile ice formations, the band's amplifiers were placed in isolation cabinets, and the concert was broadcast through headphones.) Since 1990, every Metallica album has débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200.

In 2009, Metallica was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. A speech was given by Flea, the bassist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who described the band's music as "this beautiful, violent thing that was unlike anything I'd ever heard before in my life," and called its motivation pure. "This is outsider music, and for it to do what it has done is truly mind-blowing," he said. Metallica is the only metal group to have had its music added to the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress. Kim Kardashian has been photographed in a Metallica shirt on at least two occasions. Beavis sported one for the entire nine-season run of "Beavis and

Butt-Head.” Though the band has made adjustments to its sound through the years—some minor, some seismic, all irritating to certain subsets of its fan base—it’s hard to think of another act that has outlasted the whims of the culture with such vigor. The band recently finished writing and recording its eleventh record, which will be released next year. “Metallica are the Marines of metal,” Scott Ian, a founder of Anthrax, told me recently. “First one in, last one out.”

Metallica’s current lineup includes the singer and rhythm guitarist James Hetfield and the drummer Lars Ulrich, both of whom co-founded the band; the lead guitarist Kirk Hammett, who joined in 1983; and the bassist Robert Trujillo, a member since 2003. Hetfield—fifty-nine, tall, graying at the temples—moves with the confident saunter of a well-armed cowboy. Ulrich, fifty-eight, radiates so much kinetic energy that it’s hard to imagine him yawning. Hammett, fifty-nine, and Trujillo, fifty-eight, are the band’s gentle, long-haired surfers, jazz enthusiasts disinclined to dramatics. If Hetfield is Metallica’s heart—its musical center and primary lyricist—Ulrich is its brain, a visionary who instinctively understands cultural terrain.

The night before the Vegas show, the band gathered at Allegiant Stadium for sound check. A scrum of about a dozen people, mostly from Metallica’s touring crew, stood on the floor to watch. (The band’s full road team has at least a hundred members.) Derek Carr, the quarterback for the Las Vegas Raiders, appeared, looking as though he were resisting an intense urge to play air guitar. Some clients of the private-plane company NetJets sat in the stands, enjoying specialty cocktails and cheering. The band periodically gathered around Ulrich’s drum kit. “Is there anything anyone wants to run?” Ulrich asked. But everyone knew what to do. At one point, Trujillo glanced out at the vacant seats and dad-joked, “I thought we were playing a sold-out show.” Even in a mostly empty stadium, the band sounded powerful, lucid, heavy.

The next afternoon, a pre-show event was scheduled for the House of Blues, somewhere in the belly of the Mandalay Bay casino. I sent a series of increasingly disoriented texts to a friend—“I’m in the casino, where are you?” “I’m in the casino?”—before we found each other. We were both wearing vintage T-shirts featuring the cemetery-themed art from “Master of Puppets,” the band’s third album.

At the bar, we lined up for plastic cups of the band's own Blackened whiskey, a bourbon-rye blend that's finished in brandy casks while Metallica songs blare from large speakers. A product description credits the music with enhancing the spirit's flavor: "The whiskey is pummeled by low-hertz soundwaves which force the whiskey deeper into the wood of the barrel, where it picks up additional wood flavor characteristics." It tasted nice. You could feel an anticipatory flutter in the air. *COVID*-19 had grounded Metallica for long stretches of 2020 and 2021. (My backstage pass featured a skull with a wispy Mohawk self-administering a *COVID* test—the results, of course, were positive.) Fans were slapping one another on the back, hooting about how much they had missed this. The feeling was: Let's pop off. People were ready to have a good-ass time—to drink too many beers, to forget their earplugs, to buy a new Metallica T-shirt with demons on it and wiggle it on over an old Metallica T-shirt with demons on it, to headbang, to contort their fingers into devil's horns and thrust them upward, to go "Ahhh!" when the pyro shot off, to shriek "Searching . . . seek and destroy!" along with fifty thousand other wild-eyed people, to turn to a friend and mouth "Yo!" when someone was soloing. Greta Van Fleet, a young rock band from Michigan, was opening for Metallica throughout the year. "Metallica has curated their own culture, and you can see the impact that's had when you look out into the audience," Greta Van Fleet's singer, Josh Kiszka, told me. "Driving to the venue, it's Metallica everywhere. That's part of how the band has changed the world a little bit."

From afar, it is easy to see Metallica as an instigating force—an accelerant, turning unruly hooligans more unruly. But that idea alone can't sustain a devoted following for decades. As we sipped our whiskey, my companion, August Thompson, a Metallica fan since his boyhood in rural New Hampshire, told me his favorite lyric, from "Escape," a thick and charging song from "Ride the Lightning" (1984): "Life's for my own, to live my own way." Hetfield repeats the sentiment, with slightly different phrasing, on "Nothing Else Matters," a song from "Metallica" (1991): "Life is ours, we live it our way." "For people like me, who always felt out of place in a hyper-violent world, and the hyper-violence that is masculinity, there's a lot of solace in that," Thompson said. Metallica's music is rooted in feelings of marginalization, and the band, despite its achievements, has found a way to maintain that point of view for more than forty years. It makes sense that people are drawn to Metallica's music, because they're ill at ease in a culture

that relentlessly valorizes things (money, love, straight teeth) that are very easy to be born without.

That night, Metallica opened its set with “Whiplash,” from “Kill ’Em All,” its début album. On the floor, mosh pits formed; from the stands, they resembled tiny riptides, bodies circling one another, sometimes submitting to a menacing current but mostly just orbiting. If you squinted, it almost looked like an ancient folk dance—something that might happen at a Greek wedding, late, after people had been drinking. “I think the best seat in the arena is the second tier up, where you get to see the band but you also get to see all the fans,” Hetfield told me later. “Forget the band—look at the audience.”

These days, the set list is mostly old songs, and the vibe is largely benevolent. Hetfield’s voice is low and scratchy, and can shift from contemplative to feral in a single note. He is prone to ending his phrases with a tight, curled snarl. He can still transform a “Yeah!” into a vast and terrifying invocation. He can also be tender and earnest, which has recently led fans to call him Papa Het. “This song goes out to all who struggle,” Hetfield said before “Fade to Black,” a ballad about suicide. “If you think you’re the only one, it’s a lie. You can talk to your friends, talk to somebody, because you are not alone.”

The band closed its encore with “Enter Sandman,” another single from “Metallica.” Even if metal is not your bag, it’s hard to deny the menacing perfection of the song’s opening riff: an E-minor chord, a wah-wah pedal, a sense that something dark and creepy is about to happen. During the chorus, I looked over at Thompson, who had the dazed and exuberant look of someone who had been cured of a disease by an itinerant preacher. All around us, people were rapt, ecstatic, and free. “I get up there and sing, and I watch people change,” Hetfield told me.

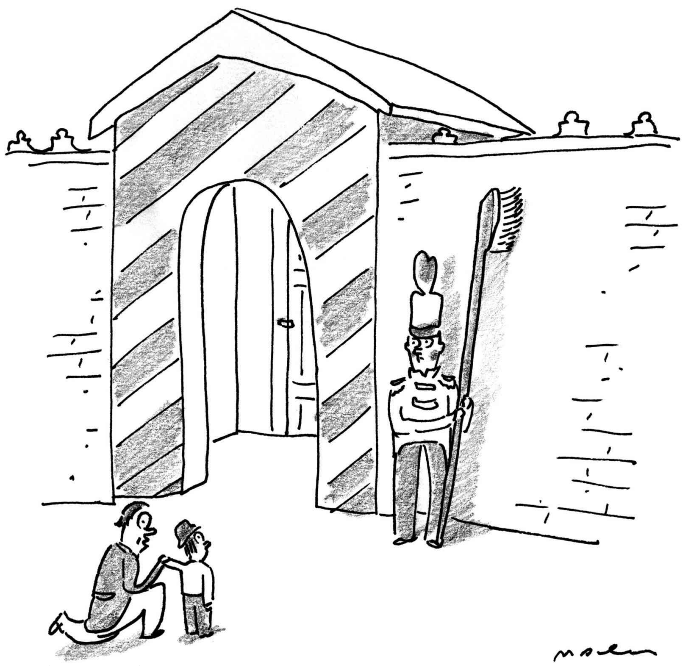
Hetfield was born in Downey, California, in 1963. His mother, Cynthia, had two sons from a previous marriage. His father, Virgil, had fought in the Second World War and started a trucking company when he returned to California. “He did not have a great childhood,” Hetfield said of his father. “My grandfather was some crazy musician who came through town, and then off he went—imagine that,” he added, laughing. His parents were

devout Christian Scientists, and had met in church, where Virgil helped lead a weekly service. But Hetfield never connected with the religion. “It felt lonely,” he said. “When my dad was up there reading from the Scriptures, he was getting tears in his eyes. It moved him. I didn’t get it. I thought something was wrong with me.” Hetfield recalled being embarrassed when he wasn’t allowed to attend health class, or receive a physical to play football. “I still carry shame about that,” he said. “How different we were to people.”

When Hetfield was thirteen, his father left. “I went off to church camp, and I came back and he was gone,” he recalled. Two years later, his mother developed cancer, but refused medical treatment on religious grounds. “We watched her wither to nothing,” he said. “She had religion around her, inside her. She had practitioners coming over. But the cancer was stronger.” Hetfield is still not entirely sure what type of cancer she had. “Probably something really curable,” he said. For a long time, Hetfield was angry that his mother had rebuffed doctors. “I thought she cared more about religion than she did her kids,” he said. “It wasn’t talked about, either—if you’re talking about it, you’re giving it power, and you want to take power away from it. So admitting that you’re sick, that’s a no-no. We just saw it happening.” Cynthia died when Hetfield was sixteen. “There was nothing solid to stand on,” he said. “I felt extremely lost.” On “The God That Failed,” an angry, punishing cut from “Metallica,” Hetfield sings about the experience: “Broken is the promise, betrayal / The healing hand held back by the deepened nail.”

Ulrich had a very different sort of childhood. He was born in Gentofte, Denmark, in 1963. His father, Torben, was both a professional tennis player and a jazz critic (the saxophonist Dexter Gordon was Ulrich’s godfather), and his family was worldly and cultured. (“We ate McDonald’s, he ate herring,” Hetfield once said of the cultural divide.) Ulrich came to the U.S. in 1979, when he was fifteen, to attend tennis camp. He ended up at the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, in Bradenton, Florida. He had been a promising youth player in Denmark, but he found the strictures of American athletic training stifling. “Curfew at 9 *P.M.*, ten o’clock lights out, four to a bunk room, and then wake up and eat cornflakes and start hitting forehands down the line for four hours, and then backhands crosscourt for the next four hours,” he said. “That was just too stringent and disciplined for me.” When

Ulrich was sixteen, his family relocated to Newport Beach, California. "In Denmark, I was at the very top end of my age group in the whole country," he said. "When I went to qualify for the tennis team at Corona del Mar High School, I wasn't one of the seven best tennis players at Corona del Mar High School. I don't think I was one of the seven best tennis players on the street that I lived on." Ulrich switched his focus to music. He was captivated by what was then called the New Wave of British Heavy Metal—bands that mixed the fury and speed of punk rock with the density and danger of metal. "When people would go, 'Heavy metal? You mean like Kansas and Van Halen and Styx and Journey?,' I'd go, 'No, like Angel Witch or Saxon or Diamond Head or the Tygers of Pan Tang,' " he said.



"He's guarding against plaque."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

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In 1981, Ulrich, seeking musicians interested in starting a band, placed a classified ad in the back of *The Recycler*, a free periodical that was originally known as *E-Z Buy E-Z Sell*. A friend of Hetfield's answered the ad, and Hetfield tagged along. "He was painfully shy," Ulrich said. "We

instantly bonded over the fact that we were loners and outsiders, and open to a best-friend relationship. Neither of us had really found who we were yet." Though their approaches to songwriting were different—"He looks at music as a math equation, I look at it as a flowing river," Hetfield said—they complemented each other. "Both of us were dreamers. At our best, our relationship was completely free of competitive energy or one-up-ness," Ulrich said. "But then when there were other people in the room it became 'Who is leading?' "

Hetfield and Ulrich recruited a second guitarist, Dave Mustaine, by placing another ad in *The Recycler*. In 1982, Hetfield and Ulrich saw a group called Trauma perform at the Whisky a Go Go, a club on the Sunset Strip. They were awed by Cliff Burton, Trauma's twenty-year-old bass player, and began trying to persuade him to join Metallica. Scott Ian, of Anthrax, said, "There was Cliff in his flares and his Lynyrd Skynyrd pin"—an affront to the punk-indebted aesthetics of the thrash scene, which included leather jackets, hefty boots, and studded belts. Unlike the members of Metallica, Burton had some musical training. He played fingerpicked bass with the boldness and harmonic sophistication of a guitarist. "He was always doing tricky stuff that would make me think, Fuck, man, where is this guy getting this from?" Kirk Hammett said. "He was just so . . . musical."

In order to get Burton, who was based in El Cerrito, a small city across the bay from San Francisco, Hetfield and Ulrich agreed to move there, renting an unassuming house on Carlson Boulevard and rehearsing in the garage. Mustaine moved into a unit on Burton's grandmother's property. Times were lean. "We'd find a tomato and some mayonnaise and make tomato sandwiches and think we were highbrow metalheads," Mustaine recalled. Ulrich described the band's early days as feeling immediate, uncomplicated: "There was only that moment, and 'Where's the beer?' "

In early 1983, Metallica was signed by Jonny Zazula—better known as Jonny Z.—a part-time concert promoter who sold heavy-metal records at an indoor flea market on Route 18 in East Brunswick, New Jersey. It was still difficult to buy imported metal albums at mainstream record shops, and a scene of sorts had sprung up around Zazula's booth. One weekend, Zazula asked Scott Ian if he wanted to hear "No Life 'Til Leather," a seven-song demo that Metallica recorded before Burton joined. The songs were raw and

deranged, distinguished by the band's adolescent mania and Hetfield's tendency to down-pick, which resulted in a thicker, heavier feel. "Holy fuck," Ian said. "Nothing sounded like that before Metallica. Straight up. It was like electricity was coming out of the tape player. Jonny Z. said, 'I'm bringing them to New York. We're gonna make an album.' I'm, like, 'You know how to do that?' And he goes, 'No!' "

Zazula and his wife, Marsha, founded Megaforce Records after shopping the Metallica demo around and failing to get an offer. When the Zazulas started Megaforce, Jonny Z. was serving a six-month sentence in a halfway house, for conspiracy to commit wire fraud. (He'd been employed by a company that passed off scrap metal as tantalum, a rare element used in the manufacture of capacitors.) He spent his weekdays feeding quarters into a pay phone, attempting to book shows. "I just got caught in this passion, like there's this little Led Zeppelin hanging out in El Cerrito, you know?" Zazula, who died earlier this year, told Mick Wall, the author of "Enter Night: A Biography of Metallica." Zazula sent the band members fifteen hundred dollars so they could drive east in a U-Haul with their gear. In "Mustaine," a 2010 autobiography, Mustaine remembers rolling out of bed, "bleary eyed, hungover, and smelling like bad cottage cheese," and noticing the truck parked out front. "We stopped for beer less than a mile after pulling out of the driveway and remained in a drunken stupor for most of the trip," he wrote.

Although Mustaine was integral to Metallica's early sound and songwriting, Hetfield and Ulrich felt that his ferocious drinking made him a liability—no small feat in a group that would later embrace the nickname Alcoholica. Not long after Metallica arrived on the East Coast, Mustaine was handed a bus ticket back to California. "I went to the only place that I could go to—my mom's—and started over," Mustaine said. That year, he formed Megadeth, which has sold fifty million records to date, and which recently released its sixteenth album, "The Sick, the Dying . . . and the Dead!"

Mark Whitaker, who managed Exodus, another Bay Area metal band, suggested Kirk Hammett, Exodus's twenty-year-old lead guitarist, to replace Mustaine. Hammett was born in San Francisco in 1962. He liked comic books and horror movies, and his mother, who was Filipino, turned him on to Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. Hammett wasn't close with his father,

a merchant marine. “When he drank, he was violent. When he wasn’t drunk, he was verbally abusive,” Hammett said. “I was a compulsive reader, and he would say things like ‘Kirk, he’s a bookworm, he’s not good at football,’ or whatever. I saw a lot of brutal behavior when I was a kid. Who’s the toughest? Who’s the meanest? Who’s the most dominant? Some of that rubbed off on me.”

That spring, Metallica invited Hammett to come east to audition. It was his first time outside California. “I might as well have landed on Mars,” Hammett told me. He had first encountered the band at a metal showcase in San Francisco. “James was quiet, and probably the skinniest person I’d ever seen. Lars . . . I’d never seen someone so European-looking. I was from the hood, you know? I grew up around a bunch of Mexicans, Filipinos, Chinese, and African Americans. I didn’t see Europeans. I didn’t even see full-on white people.” The meeting was brief, and blurred by alcohol. “When I came out to New York, I wasn’t a hundred per cent sure they remembered me or what I looked like,” Hammett said. The first song he played with the band was “Seek and Destroy.” He got the job. At the time, Metallica was living in a run-down practice space in Jamaica, Queens. There was no heat, hot water, showers, or beds. “I would wrap my leather jacket into a pillow,” Hammett said.

“Kill ’Em All” was released on July 25, 1983, on Zazula’s Megaforce Records. Hetfield describes the record’s themes as “headbanging, death, and blood.” “Ride the Lightning” followed a year later. From the start, Metallica refused to capitulate, stylistically or otherwise, to anything happening around it. “They have, more than any other major modern band, consistently ignored what other groups were trying to do,” the critic Chuck Klosterman told me. The band members dressed as though they spent most of their days loitering outside a gas station. Their music was harsh, fast, and difficult. “We were always coming up against people who were telling us, ‘We can’t play you on the radio,’ or ‘You guys are too ugly,’ ” Hammett said.

For Metallica, the idea was never to seduce an audience, but to push it away. The fans who stuck around—who perhaps understood this as a kind of love—became devoted, and received devotion in return.

In 1984, Metallica left Megaforce, signed to Elektra Records, and agreed to a management deal with Q-Prime, a new firm specializing in heavy metal. Cliff Burnstein, an owner of Q-Prime, found that promoting Metallica to a general audience was nearly impossible. America was in the grip of a bizarre moral frenzy—the Satanic Panic, which linked heavy metal with demonic rituals—and the band had cultivated a reputation as dangerous. "When we had a tour, I would get in touch with radio stations along the way and try to get them to play Metallica," Burnstein recalled. "The typical response I'd get was 'No, you will never hear Metallica on our station.' So then my response would be 'I'd like to give you tickets to give away.' And the typical response to that was 'We will not even say the name Metallica on our station.' "

To some degree, trepidation was warranted. Burnstein recalled a show at the Felt Forum, a smaller theatre within Madison Square Garden. "During the first song, one person ripped a chair cushion off and flung it onstage. By the end of the song, there was not a cushion left on a chair," he said. "Instead of getting paid, we paid Madison Square Garden for the damages." At a particularly calamitous show at the Long Beach Arena, in California, "people were ripping fixtures out of the bathroom, people were hanging from the balcony," Burnstein said. Hetfield and Ulrich later appeared on the radio to ask fans to stop trashing the venues.

But the Metallica experience was not designed to be friendly. Hetfield would sometimes antagonize the audience, growling, "Hey, any time this stuff gets too heavy for you . . . tough shit!" Offstage, the members of Metallica provoked one another, particularly Ulrich and Hetfield. Their complex, brotherly dynamic—Hetfield was possessive; Ulrich was demanding—sometimes threatened to overwhelm the band. "We would get drunk, and just start in," Hammett said. "I remember once James got up and pushed Lars, and Lars literally flew across the room. We would see each other and start wrestling. We could be in a room of twenty people and we'd fixate on each other. No one else mattered." To an extent, Metallica thrived on conflict. "Toxic masculinity has fuelled this band," Hammett said. "I'm still sitting around saying, 'O.K., I'm gonna write a really, really tough, kick-ass riff.' Just look at my rhetoric there: *tough*, *kick-ass* riff. It's an aggression that everyone feels, but it was ratcheted up in us—this weird masculine macho bullshit thing."

In September, 1985, the band flew to Copenhagen to make its next album, “Master of Puppets.” The record spent seventy-two weeks on the *Billboard* 200, and became the band’s first album to go gold. *Rolling Stone* called it “pure apocalyptic dread.” Many still consider it the greatest thrash record of all time. “Master of Puppets” closes with “Damage, Inc.,” a sharp, flogging song that feels like being locked in a batting cage with a malfunctioning pitching machine. Lyrically, it offers both affirmation and absolution. “Fuck it all and fucking no regrets,” Hetfield screams.

In 1986, the band secured a slot opening for Ozzy Osbourne, the former vocalist for Black Sabbath, on the American leg of a solo tour. “I’ve had a special place in my heart for Metallica ever since they went on tour with me in the eighties,” Osbourne told me. “In my opinion, they took over where Sabbath left off, and they deserve everything they’ve achieved.” The run was a success. “Ninety per cent of the people in those sold-out arenas didn’t know who Metallica were, and they blew people’s brains out,” Scott Ian said.



The band in its rehearsal space.Photograph by Ian Allen for The New Yorker

That fall, Metallica headlined a European tour. On September 27th, the band was travelling overnight through Sweden when its bus skidded off the road. Cliff Burton, the bassist, was tossed through a window. Hetfield, Ulrich, and Hammett stood outside in their underwear, in the stark and frigid dawn,

staring at Burton's legs while they waited for a crane to lift the bus off the rest of his body. Burton was twenty-four. His death was sudden and gruesome. Anthrax had been opening for Metallica. "We sat in a room together and just drank and drank," Ian told me. "It was really hard for them in the late eighties, going into the nineties, never really taking the time to properly grieve or process it." He paused. "Who knew how to do that?"

Less than a month after Burton's death, the band hired the bassist Jason Newsted, and soon it began recording its fourth album, ". . . And Justice for All," which is famous for the single "One," and for containing almost no audible bass. Whether that was the result of Newsted's hewing too close to Hetfield's rhythm guitar, or of hazing born from fresh grief, remains unclear. "When I joined the band, everybody was full alcoholic," Newsted said. "They had lost their guide. Cliff was their teacher."

For its fifth album, "Metallica," in 1991—known as the Black Album because of its "Spinal Tap"-esque monochromatic cover art, which features only a coiled snake and the band's name—the band hired the Canadian producer Bob Rock, who had previously worked on blockbuster releases by Bon Jovi, Aerosmith, and Mötley Crüe. The record's themes are bleak (the single "Enter Sandman" was written about sudden infant death syndrome), but the songs are limber, catchy, and dynamic. Hammett recalled a conversation with Rock about how the band might achieve even greater fame. "The work doesn't stop after you finish recording. Every single interview, every single appearance, every single everything—you need to do it all," Hammett said. "That's what Jon Bon Jovi did."

The Black Album ultimately spent six hundred and twenty-five weeks on the *Billboard* charts and sold almost thirty-five million copies worldwide, becoming one of the best-selling albums of all time. Five singles—"Enter Sandman," "The Unforgiven," "Nothing Else Matters," "Wherever I May Roam," and "Sad but True"—entered the Hot 100, and the band became a mainstay on MTV and modern-rock radio. "A lot of people talk down about it, or say that Metallica sold out," Kerry King, of Slayer, told me. "Would I have wanted another 'Damage, Inc.'? Fuck yeah. But it wasn't on that record. And that record made them fucking superstars."

The following year, the band co-headlined a stadium tour with Guns N' Roses. At a show in Montreal, there was a miscommunication about pyrotechnic cues during "Fade to Black," and Hetfield stepped directly into a twelve-foot plume of flame, suffering second- and third-degree burns on his hand and arm. After he was taken to the hospital, Guns N' Roses waited more than two hours to go on; Axl Rose, Guns N' Roses' mercurial front man, then left the stage early. Riots broke out. Cars were turned over, bonfires were started, merch cases were smashed with rocks. In retrospect, Montreal was the end of something. Grunge, a righteous new subset of hard rock, made a point of rejecting the excess and dumbness of the eighties: no more women writhing across the hoods of cars, no more peacocking in skintight leather trousers. Metallica had always repudiated such extravagance—the members wore jeans and black T-shirts and worked hard—but the band was nonetheless at risk of becoming stuck on the wrong side of the cultural divide.

One potential solution was for Metallica to position itself as antithetical to Guns N' Roses and other bands of that ilk. The 1992 documentary "A Year and a Half in the Life of Metallica" features a scene in which Hetfield mocks Rose's personal backstage rider, which included a cup of cubed ham, a rib-eye-steak dinner, a gourmet cheese tray, a fresh pepperoni pizza, Pringles, and a bottle of what Hetfield calls "Dom Perig-non." In the video for "Nothing Else Matters," Ulrich is briefly shown pulling darts out of a photo of Kip Winger, the suave and flashy vocalist for the metal band Winger. In 1996, Metallica released "Load," its sixth album, which was followed, in 1997, by a companion piece, "Reload." Both records are loose and bluesy by Metallica standards. Before the release of "Load," all four members cut their hair short, which made certain fans apoplectic.

Hetfield now believes that "Load" and "Reload" were shaped too acutely by a desire for reinvention. "We've always been very organic. 'Load' and 'Reload' felt different to me," he said. "Felt forced." It was an unsteady time for Metallica. In 2000, the band, led by a seething Ulrich, filed a lawsuit against the file-sharing network Napster, after an unreleased version of "I Disappear," a song recorded for the "Mission: Impossible 2" soundtrack, was leaked on the network. Ulrich insists that the lawsuit was not about money but about control. He was right to be outraged, but the technology was new, he was rich, and most of the people using Napster were college

students in pajama pants. Ulrich was demonized. He was also prescient. "I take no solace in that at all," he told me. "It was a street fight. It was 'You're fucking with us, we're gonna fuck with you.' And then it just ran amok. In retrospect, could we have done a better job of seeing that coming? Probably."

In 2001, Newsted left the band, citing physical damage to his body and a dispute with Hetfield about a solo project. "When you're one of the four that make the thing go round, the sacrifices that you have to make . . . it's not for everyone, man," Newsted said. "That's why there's only one band like this." Bob Rock agreed to temporarily fill in on bass as Metallica began work on "St. Anger," its eighth album. Three months into the sessions, Hetfield abruptly entered an intensive rehabilitation program, mostly for alcoholism, and then he dedicated himself to aftercare and family therapy. In total, Hetfield took eleven months off from Metallica. For a while, it seemed unlikely that the band would survive the hiatus. "There were six months where they were done, no question," Rock said.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss

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When Hetfield finally returned, there were boundaries. He would work only from noon to 4 *P.M.*, so that he could attend meetings and spend time with his children. His bandmates chafed against the new restrictions. With some nudging from Q-Prime, Metallica had been working with Phil Towle, a

performance coach who functioned more like a therapist, and kept him on the payroll until it started to seem as though he wanted to join the band. Ulrich’s father arrived from Denmark to listen to some early songs. His reaction? “I would delete that.”

Metallica also still needed to find a permanent bassist. Robert Trujillo, a former member of the thrash-punk band Suicidal Tendencies, was invited to audition. Trujillo, who was born in Santa Monica in 1964, to a Mexican mother and a Native American and Spanish father, is thoughtful and serene. He wears his bass low and his long black hair in braids. When he performs with Metallica, he often creeps across the stage, seesawing from one leg to the other, a move that fans have dubbed the “crab walk.” His bass audition took place over two days. “The first day, I was just a fly on the wall. And then at about eleven o’clock at night Lars goes, ‘Hey, do you want to go get a drink?’ We end up drinking until five in the morning,” Trujillo told me. “People ask me, ‘Was there any hazing? Were you tested in any kind of way?’ I think that might have been part of it for him. At 9 *A.M*. he’s on the treadmill, and I’m there with this massive hangover.” That evening, Metallica offered Trujillo a place in the band. He was still wearing one of Ulrich’s Armani T-shirts from the night before. (Early the next year, they gave him a million-dollar signing bonus.)

In what might be the most fortuitous timing in the history of documentary film, the directors Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky had been in place to shoot the making of “St. Anger” for a goofy promotional gimmick—a series of late-night infomercials advertising the new record. Instead, they created a full-length film, “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster,” which was released in 2004. These days, big-budget music documentaries tend to be produced or even directed by the artists themselves, and to unfold in predictable ways: a little tension, a lot of comeback. But “Some Kind of Monster” shows Metallica, a band famous for being seemingly impervious even to the death of one of its members, at its clumsiest and most vulnerable. When I first saw the movie, I was twenty-four and found the incongruity of it—some guy in a sweater asking Metallica to talk about feelings—funny; now, at forty-two, I find it unbelievably poignant.

In the end, Metallica made a record with all the defeated energy of a sinking stone. “St. Anger” is airless, and lacks magic. (It also lacks guitar solos.)

“Eh, it’s honest,” Hetfield told me, shrugging. “You might not identify with it, or you don’t like the sound. But that’s where we were, and that’s what we put out. It’ll have its time, maybe.” He laughed. “Maybe not!”

Somehow, Metallica managed to survive. “It was the four of us in a room with our instruments, looking at each other and going, ‘O.K., it starts again, right now, in this moment,’ ” Hammett said. The idea of moving on, and never looking back, has long been central to the band’s ethos. Though it would be strange to talk about Metallica’s music as hopeful or optimistic—it is not—the band has been propelled, in a nearly pathological way, by a kind of anti-nostalgia, a frenetic faith in whatever comes next. “The past just fucks things up—always,” Hetfield said to *Rolling Stone* in 1993. Ulrich told me that he contemplates the band’s history only when he’s being interviewed, and that even then it tends to assume an uncanny, almost mythic quality.

In 2007, the band hired Rick Rubin to produce its ninth studio album, “Death Magnetic,” and Rubin proposed a thought experiment to the members: What kind of record would they make if Metallica didn’t exist? “The weight of the title ‘Metallica’ is a heavy one,” Rubin told me. “What is the music you write if nobody has heard of you before?” To an extent, every Metallica record is a concept album about death—wanting it, fearing it—but none embraces dying quite as explicitly as “Death Magnetic.” The songs are fast, complex, ornery, and surprising. There are elaborate, harmonized guitar solos, rhythm changes, and lyrics that consider the delicate membrane separating the still living from the gone forever. “Just a Bullet Away,” an outtake, sees Hetfield again imagining, in a close and intimate way, what it might feel like to kill oneself. “All reflections look the same / In the shine of the midnight revolver,” he sings, his voice shuddering. If Hetfield saw his mother’s unwillingness to receive medical treatment as an inadvertent embrace of death, rather than as an expression of faith, it would make sense for his life’s work to interrogate that impulse. “There are times when I’m so afraid of dying,” Hetfield told me. “Other times, it’s, like, I’m good,” he said. “I feel cleaned up inside.”

In September, 2019, Hetfield returned to rehab, and the band cancelled a tour of Australia and New Zealand; five months later, Metallica pulled out of two American festivals, because, as Hetfield explained in a message to fans,

“I have critical recovery events on those weekends that cannot be moved.” “It wasn’t a tune-up, that’s for sure,” Hetfield said of that stint in rehab. “It was me dropping the toolbox and saying, ‘I don’t need this. I’m tired of this.’ It was too much work being on the road and trying to stay connected with home. I was not caring for myself. I know that’s kind of the theme here—me not knowing how to take care of myself.”

The hammering title track of Metallica’s tenth album, “Hardwired . . . to Self-Destruct” (2016), grapples with whether it’s possible to thwart our most damaging tendencies. “On the way to paranoia / On the crooked borderline / On the way to great destroyer / Doom design,” Hetfield barks. His response to help is sometimes aggression. “I don’t like being told what to do,” he said. “I can identify what the problem is, easy. But what’s the solution?” He paused. “I don’t know if I want to hear the solution. I kind of want to still be stuck in my shit.” Earlier this year, Hetfield filed for divorce from Francesca Tomasi, his wife of twenty-five years. Hetfield continues to cite Tomasi as crucial to his early sobriety. “She was the one that threw me out of the house to go find help. I don’t want to call it tough love, because that’s cheapening it,” he said. “It couldn’t have been easy for her to say, ‘Get out.’ That affects her life, too.”



“Attention, passengers. Did you hear that really important update I just gave? You didn’t, did you? Well, I hope that podcast was worth it, because I won’t be saying it again.”
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

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I asked Hetfield if, in the absence of drugs and alcohol, music might also offer a useful kind of oblivion. I’ve felt it, as a fan—the edges of my consciousness get a little blurry, maybe I forget where I am. He nodded. “There are many names for it. I call it getting in the zone,” he said. “You’re

not feeling shameful about past stuff, you're not future-tripping in fear about what's coming up next. You're right there, and you're doing exactly what you need to do." He went on, "I think everyone searches for that sense of presence. I searched for it in the wrong medicines for a long time. I just wanted to turn my head off. That worked until it didn't work. Finding a new god that isn't alcohol . . . yeah, that's what I'm still workin' on."

This past spring, the San Francisco Giants hosted Metallica Night at Oracle Park. Hetfield and Hammett were scheduled to perform an instrumental version of the national anthem on their guitars, and Hetfield would throw out the first pitch. The day before, they convened at what Metallica calls HQ—an inconspicuous, semi-industrial complex in San Rafael. It contains the band's administrative offices, a studio, conference rooms, and a cavernous practice space decorated with hand-painted flags from around the world and other fan-made ephemera. Hetfield and Hammett ran through the anthem a few times. There was some messing around. There were some big riffs. In their hands, the anthem became burly, lawless, and tough.

The following afternoon, Hetfield warmed up outside the park with one of the band's physical therapists. He was throwing hard. "Better to go too far than to have it bloop-bloop-bloop to the plate," Hetfield said. Earlier, in the greenroom, he had watched a video of Mariah Carey's infamous first pitch at the Tokyo Dome, in 2008, in which she spectacularly whiffed it wearing four-inch platform heels, big sunglasses, and short shorts. "This seems much harder to do in hot pants," he said.

I asked Hetfield if he was more nervous about the pitch than about the anthem. "Oh, yeah," he said. Football is more his game. Hetfield grew up rooting for the Oakland Raiders, before the team moved to Las Vegas, and he said that playing the Raiders' new stadium in Vegas had been "a big deal." He met the quarterback Derek Carr that night after sound check. "He's a super-spiritual guy, and I connected right away with that," he said. "I was a total dork, like, 'Derek, this is gonna be weird, but can I get your phone number?' I never ask anyone for that. We text back and forth."

When it was time to run through the anthem, which would take place near the pitcher's mound, a security guard—older, testy—stopped Hetfield. "I gotta scan ya," he barked, reaching for Hetfield's credential. "You gotta scan

me?” Hetfield laughed, with the incredulity of someone who has not been stopped by a security guard in several decades. “I gotta scan ya,” the guy repeated, unmoved. On the field, players—including the outfielders Mike Yastrzemski and Joc Pederson—lined up to pay their respects. Alex Wood, a pitcher, appeared holding a Sharpie and a bottle of Blackened whiskey that he keeps in his locker.

After sound check, Hammett and I sat high in the empty stands, overlooking the bay. The sky was wide and cloudless. “This area here used to be filled with run-down warehouses and factories from the forties,” Hammett said, pointing across the water. “After school, me and my friends, still in our Catholic-school uniforms, used to prowl around down here and throw rocks. All the windows were already broken out, but we’d try to get the last shards of glass.”

Since joining Metallica, Hammett has had to find a way to survive in a band led by two alpha males. “If you’re a lead guitarist of that kind of talent, the idea that you’d be third when people are listing band members—most people could not live with that,” Burnstein, of Q-Prime, told me. “But Kirk is a pure player. He lives to play.” Hammett, who is Buddhist, will talk at length about consciousness, God, enlightenment, resonance, Nirvana. He believes that the work he does with Metallica is an extension of some sublime and omnipotent creative force. “I put myself in this space where I take in all the creativity around me and I channel it to create more,” he said. His hope is that Metallica facilitates a healing sort of fellowship. “We are so nondenominational,” he said, laughing. “Come to the Church of Metallica. You’ll become a member and rejoice! You don’t have to direct anything at us. You can direct it at the experience that you’re having.”

That evening, Hetfield and Hammett shredded their way through the anthem. Afterward, Hetfield handed off his guitar and strode toward the pitcher’s mound. The throw was good. Strong, assured, unwavering. Straight across the plate.

In July, the Netflix series “Stranger Things”—which follows a group of rangy, anxious teens as they attempt to save their home town from a spooky alternative dimension known as the Upside Down—débuted the second part of its fourth season. The show is the platform’s most watched original series.

The main protagonists are devotees of Dungeons & Dragons and members of something called the Hellfire Club, which is led by a sweet metalhead named Eddie Munson. In the season finale, Munson, who preaches nonconformity as a kind of sanctifying practice, volunteers—spoiler alert!—to sacrifice himself, and does so while standing on the roof of a trailer in the Upside Down, playing the guitar solo from the song "Master of Puppets." (The season is set in 1986.) Two weeks after the episode was released, "Master of Puppets," which is more than eight minutes long, appeared on the Hot 100 for the first time, at No. 40. (The show gave a similar boost to Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)," which came out in 1985.) "Master of Puppets" entered the Top Ten on Spotify's U.S. chart, and the Top Fifty on its global chart; soon, it had been streamed more than half a billion times.

Unsurprisingly, older Metallica fans found the attention annoying. It's easy to forget that, in the mid-eighties, publicly identifying as a Metallica fan often meant being labelled a druggie, a weirdo, a creep; back then, a person suffered socially for an allegiance to thrash. The idea that true metal fandom requires weathering such stigma is foundational and long-standing. Yet the band was quick to embrace its new acolytes. Metallica's members even filmed themselves wearing Hellfire Club T-shirts and jamming along to footage of Munson's solo. In a pinned comment on its official TikTok, the band clarified its open-door policy: "FYI—EVERYONE is welcome in the Metallica Family. Whether you've been a fan for 40 hours or 40 years." Well, fine. The solo was recorded for the show by Tye Trujillo, Robert Trujillo's eighteen-year-old son. The hope was that it would sound raw and frenetic, as though a teen-ager were playing it. "I don't think Tye fully understood how this thing was gonna blossom," Trujillo told me. "I liked that. At our house, we don't have a whole lot of TV going all the time. We live in Topanga Canyon, and there's a lot of time to play music and make art and go hiking and surfing. In some ways, he's sheltered from the energy around these kinds of things. There's a purity there, which I love."

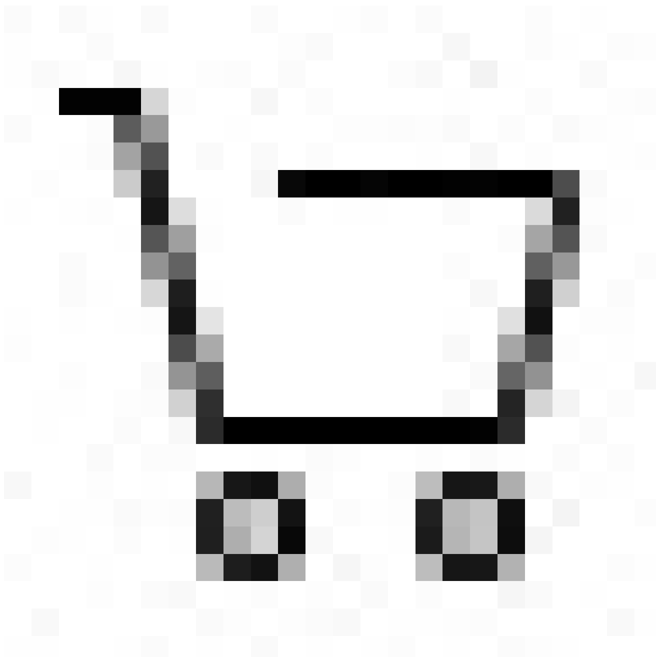


"The time has come for you to all compliment my cooking."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

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In late July, Metallica headlined Lollapalooza, in Chicago—its first U.S. date since the “Stranger Things” finale aired. When the band first played the festival, in 1996, the booking angered Perry Farrell, Lollapalooza’s co-founder and the front man of the alt-rock band Jane’s Addiction. “A lot of people were pissed,” Burnstein told me. “I understand how Perry felt—like his alternative thing was being co-opted.” He added, “Of course, there was Perry last night backstage, saying hi to the guys.” These days, Lollapalooza is mostly indistinguishable from any other major American music festival. The weekend’s other headliners included the pop star Dua Lipa, the rapper J. Cole, and the pop-punk band Green Day. In the wake of “Stranger Things,” Metallica was now the most newsworthy act on the bill.

The night before the show, the band met in Grant Park to film a short skit with Joseph Quinn, the twenty-nine-year-old British actor who plays Munson. “You’re taller than on the TV,” Hetfield joked, shaking Quinn’s hand. The band took Quinn into its tuning trailer to jam. “I’ll give you a four count,” Ulrich said, drumsticks aloft. Quinn left with a signed guitar; the video was posted to the band’s social-media accounts. Afterward, the band went onstage to rehearse. It had rained earlier in the day, and the ground was slick with mud. I stood on a piece of plywood in a mostly empty field and watched Metallica warm up.

Hetfield has evolved into a magnetic front man. Early on, he said, his stage persona—cocky, aggressive, hard—was mostly aspirational. “Being up onstage is a fantasy world,” he said. “Everyone is out there sprinkling you with wonderful dust. You start to believe it, and then you get home and you go, ‘Where’s my dust?’ ” he said. “Not so wonderful now, sitting here alone with two cats, taking the garbage out.” On tour, he said, the days off are harder than the days on. There’s nowhere to funnel the energy; time turns into a strange, liminal expanse. “My body is tired, but my mind is still going. What do I do with that?” he said. “I just ask people in the crew, or friends, or my assistant, ‘Hey, can you just sit down and watch TV with me?’ ” “Moth Into Flame,” a song from “Hardwired . . . to Self Destruct,” is about the intoxication of celebrity. “I believe the addiction to fame is a real thing,” Hetfield said. “I’ve got my little recovery posse on the road to help me out. We’ll say a prayer before going onstage: ‘James, you’re a human being. You’re going to die. You’re here doing service. You’re doing the best you can.’ That is helpful for me.”

The following afternoon, the park filled with thousands of Metallica shirts, many of which looked conspicuously new. The atmosphere backstage was relaxed. I sat on a wicker couch with Robert Trujillo and drank a brand of canned water called Liquid Death. One of the group’s trailers was labelled “Yoga.” Shortly before Metallica’s set, I climbed a riser on the edge of the stage so that I could see both the band and the crowd. Festival sets can be hard—much of the audience had been bobbing in the late-July sun for nine hours by the time Metallica took the stage—but the energy was high. “Master of Puppets” has been a fixture on the band’s set list for decades, but now it’s been granted extra prominence as the final song of the encore. As Hammett began to play the solo, footage of Eddie Munson appeared on huge screens flanking the stage. The crowd went nuts. I clung to the edge of the riser. For a moment, it felt as though all of Chicago were shaking.

After Metallica’s set, Ulrich rushed off to the Metro, a rock club near Wrigley Field. His two oldest sons—Myles and Layne—play in an excellent bass-and-drums duo called Taipei Houston, and had a gig opening for the British band Idles. “That was the past, this is the future!” Ulrich joked, sprinting toward a waiting S.U.V. wearing a navy-blue bathrobe with the hood up. At the Metro, he stood in the V.I.P. balcony, glowing with pride. After the set, as Myles and Layne dutifully broke down their gear, Ulrich

chatted with the club's owner, Joe Shanahan, about the first time Metallica played the Metro, in August of 1983, opening for the metal band Raven. Ulrich was nineteen.

Later, over tea at his hotel, I asked Ulrich about the "Stranger Things" phenomenon. He leaned back, sanguine: "If you and I were sitting here twenty years ago, thirty years ago, back then it was really only about the music. Partaking in these sorts of opportunities would have been considered selling out. But the culture is so much more forgiving of these types of things now." He continued, "When you've been around as long as we have, you have to kind of ebb and flow. I don't think there were any writeups about Lollapalooza this morning that didn't mention Eddie, didn't mention 'Stranger Things.' And it's not like 'Eh, what the fuck, is the music not good enough?' It's like . . . it's cool."

In 2021, the band released "The Metallica Blacklist," a collection of fifty-three covers of songs from the Black Album, in honor of the record's thirtieth anniversary. Twelve of the fifty-three artists chose to cover "Nothing Else Matters," which Hetfield wrote when the band was on tour in support of ". . . And Justice for All." Elton John once compared "Nothing Else Matters" (favorably) to "Greensleeves." It is, by my accounting, Metallica's first song about romantic love. Hetfield can be coy about its origins—he missed his girlfriend; he found that feeling embarrassing—but it is also true that, since its initial release, "Nothing Else Matters" has come to sound less specifically romantic and more like an ode to any kind of life-sustaining devotion. It's technically a waltz, but it feels like the last of the great power ballads: momentous, tortured, cathartic, triumphant. The Metallica community often talks about the track as a fan anthem of sorts. In moments of deep communion with the band and its music, nothing else matters. It's an emotional song, but a terrifying one, too. "What's heavier than love?" Scott Ian said.

This sort of vulnerability was once anathema to Metallica—"What I've felt, what I've known / Never shined through in what I've shown," Hetfield sings on "The Unforgiven"—but it now feels central to the band's mission. The singer and songwriter Kris Kristofferson, a longtime supporter, praised Metallica's humanity and good will. "I'm a huge fan of their music, but even more so of the remarkable human beings they are," he told me. "All heart."

In conversation, I found Hetfield warm and disarmingly open. He often inquired after my baby daughter. When I mentioned that I was having a hard time sleeping in my hotel room, he reminded me that it was important to have something from home. “My daughter gave me these stones—what are they called? Crystals,” he said. “You’ve gotta bring something. A pillowcase, some lavender oil.”

One afternoon, I asked Hetfield if he felt as though he’d finally found the life and community he’d always wanted: he lives in Colorado, hunting, beekeeping, spending time outdoors; he sees friends; he tours with Metallica. He paused to consider the question. “Will I ever admit that I found it? Will I ever allow myself to be happy enough to say I found it? Maybe that’s a lifelong quest, the search for family,” he said. “When my family disintegrated, early on in life, I found it in music, I found it in the band. I remember Lars being the first one to buy a house and have friends over, and I was, like, ‘Who are these people? You didn’t invite me! You’re cheating on me with another family!’ Obviously, our fans have become a kind of worldwide family. But at the end of the day they say they love you and you kind of go, ‘O.K. . . . what does that really mean?’ ”

But they do at least love a version of you, I ventured—the version of you that exists in the work.

“Yeah, and what version is that?” Hetfield countered.

It was a naïve thought, presuming that he could cloister or delineate a self in the context of a band he has led his entire adult life. “Metallica is bigger than the individual members,” Burnstein told me. “And to some extent, in their lives, they are subservient to the idea of Metallica.” That feeling of obligation has kept the band going, by giving shape to what its members have sacrificed. “The fifth member of Metallica is the collective,” Ulrich said. “People say, ‘What does Metallica mean to you?’ It’s just a fuckin’ . . . it’s a state of mind.” He paused. “Metallica is the whole energy of the universe. We just steer it along.” ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By Hannah Gold

By Jill Lepore

Shouts & Murmurs

- My Last Will and Testament, on VHS

By Jay Katsir

If you are watching this, it means I am dead. It also means that you have managed to find a VCR. Well done. I was concerned that recording a VHS tape was no longer a viable way to prepare a Video Will, but I have always believed in tradition, particularly the tradition of forcing an expressionless lawyer to insert a tape into a VCR while one's adult children sit in tense anticipation around a large glossy table, some dabbing their eyes, others stealing suspicious glances at their stepmother, who appears all too composed. Besides, it would seem crass to prepare for one's demise by recording a digital Video Will preset to go out as an e-mail blast, or, worse, posted to a surprise WhatsApp group called Father Has Perished. If your loved ones don't have their settings right, the video would automatically save to their phones, and who has enough storage for a six-minute Surprise Will from Dad? My survivors might feel obligated to delete their vacation pics, and that shall not be my legacy.

So why have I chosen to relay my posthumous wishes thusly, instead of with a normal will that everyone can just read? Is it because I fear that I will be murdered? Not a chance. My loyal security chief, Gerard, has signed an irrevocable no-murder pledge, and, to reward him, I've left him a fortune in gold bullion in the event of my untimely death by murder. So, no way it was him.

Now, with a heavy heart, it's bequeathin' time! To my eldest, Brinston, I leave the vast stock portfolio I have amassed as a captain of industry. To his brother Nuthbert, I leave my considerable real-estate holdings as a city father. As for the swag I received as a visiting grandee, it shall go to my twins, Ruster and Baoiaioin.

This is much better than reading a boring paper will, right? I feel like the host of a reality show called "What You Deserve."

On to my precious daughter, Elindagel. I have no doubt that you are sitting there with a brave face, trying to suppress tears as you recall our childhood games of penny-snoot and dollop-the-heath. It's pretty sad that you never beat me at those games, even though you made them up and they were super easy. It would bring great comfort to my soul if you were to take charge of my racing stables (for the horses trust you above all others), and also my

business empire and my collection of airport magnets. Do not let “Chillaxin’ at LAX” fall into the hands of my rival monopolist, R. Gribbs.

To R. Gribbs, I leave my fleet of midsize luxury hats. He has earned them after a life spent in relentless pursuit of outliving me. Kudos, Gribbs! Is he in the room there? I should hope not, given our horn-locking, but, if he suddenly enters to claim what by no right should be his, what a shocker that would be! I’m all for it. Every Video Will needs a moment when the assembled gasp, and someone storms out in fury. Perhaps it will be your stepmother, who up until now has been curiously unruffled. Is she ruffled? Ridged, at least? I cannot see, because I am dead.

This is fun. Imagine if, before I passed, each of you had lovingly sat at my bedside, so I could have conveyed my wishes in person. No, it was definitely the right move to make you watch a tape together in order to hear all of the shattering revelations at the same time. I hereby confess my addiction to pornographic video games! What can I say, they’re a romp.

You will each find, in front of you on the table, a carved mahogany box. You may now open it. Inside, you will find a key to a separate safe-deposit box. I admire safe-deposit boxes above all other forms of storage; they are as impractical as a Video Will. A tiny key that you have to keep track of for years, so that you can travel to a faraway building and ask permission to see your own diamond? Exquisite. What will you find awaiting you at the bank? A mysterious photograph of the very box that sits before you, leading you on a wild and recursive hunt for my ultimate treasure. I’ll save you some time: the final clue is “pizza” and the treasure is a weird little golden fish.

I realize this must be difficult. I don’t expect you to approve of everything I’ve said today, any more than I expect this recording to hold up in probate court. But I am grateful that this Video Will has afforded you, my dear ones, a last chance to see me in full flower, while I’m, like, mega-compos-mentis, doing what I love most about being alive: living. Now I bid you adieu, and before we part forever I want to assure you that I leave this world at peace, satisfied with what I have accomplished. Because, for once, everyone had to watch *my* pick for Movie Night. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

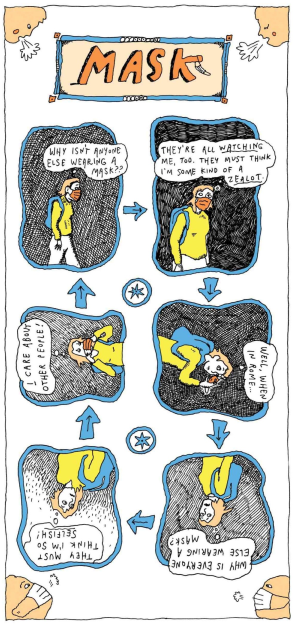
By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Sketchpad

- **The Great Masking Cycle**

By Liana Finck



By Liana Finck

By Rachel Deutsch

By Dennard Dayle

By Catherine Mevs

Tables for Two

- **Luxurious Standards at L’Ami Pierre and Lodi**

By [Hannah Goldfield]

The first thing I saw one recent afternoon at L’Ami Pierre, a new French café in midtown, was a man with a hunk of baguette hanging from his mouth. The moment was not staged. The man was on the move, holding the rest of the paper-sleeved loaf in the crook of his arm as he pulled on his jacket. The bread had been genuinely irresistible.

It seemed plausible, before I tried it, that this baguette could be the best in the world. L’Ami Pierre (149 W. 51st St.) sits across a pedestrian walkway from the restaurant Le Bernardin, and, though the businesses are not technically affiliated, they have in common Eric Ripert, Le Bernardin’s longtime chef and co-owner. In September, Ripert opened L’Ami Pierre with his friend Pierre-Antoine Raberin, a former co-president of the macaron brand Ladurée. (Ripert serves mostly as a consultant, but his name is on the awning.)



The café is a collaboration between Pierre-Antoine Raberin, a former co-president of Ladureé, and Eric Ripert, of Le Bernardin.

In November, Le Bernardin turned fifty. Its founders, the siblings Maguy and Gilbert Le Coze, opened the seafood-focussed restaurant on the Left Bank of Paris in 1972, and moved it to New York in 1986. Ripert, who is fifty-seven, began working there in 1991. In the decades since, he has managed to maintain the highest accolades—Michelin stars, *Times* stars, top positioning on local and global best-of lists—and has become a celebrity.

On another afternoon, I went to Le Bernardin alone for lunch. I drank champagne, and ate a precisely circular disk of scallop tartare topped with a generous quenelle of caviar, then medallions of lobster in a verjus sabayon, then a plump fillet of halibut over sunchoke-truffle purée, surrounded by tiny, toylike carrots, roasted to perfection. For dessert, I spooned chocolate pot de crème and caramel out of a hollowed eggshell. The food was beautiful, the service impeccable. I couldn't take my eyes off a couple sitting a few tables over. Both were dressed to the nines but their manner was utterly blasé, as if this hushed, almost holy dining room were a mere cafeteria.



A selection of pâtisseries includes chocolate-raspberry tarts.

The man with the baguette seemed, somehow, to have had a more sensual experience. It would be hard to argue that L'Ami Pierre's baguette is the best in the world, or even in New York, but I am willing to make a case that there's nothing more luxurious than a *jambon-beurre*, the classic French sandwich of ham and butter. The version at L'Ami Pierre fulfills its basic promise. With a shiny, golden, crackly crust and a soft but chewy crumb, the baguette, baked on the premises, holds up to its luscious fillings.

The café's grab-and-go salads on refrigerated shelves—chicken Caesar; spinach with goat cheese and pine nuts—left me cold, and a butternut-squash soup was on the bitter end of earthy. But the viennoiseries—

particularly the *pain aux raisins*—sang with clear notes of butter, as did a chocolate-chip cookie, further distinguished by its unusual, tart-like shape, slightly dipped in the middle, with steep, crisp edges and rectangular morsels of dense, rich chocolate.

A few blocks away, Ignacio Mattos shows us what can happen when a chef of the highest pedigree lends expertise to the pursuit of small daily pleasures, in addition to rarefied multicourse dining. At tables on a covered "terrazza" at Lodi (1 Rockefeller Plaza), his Milan-inspired café, you can order a lavish meal. Don't miss the elegant squiggles of ravishing chicken-liver pâté on crostini, or the bone-in pork Milanese, when available. Inside are a coffee bar and a bakery that uphold the same standards more casually, astonishing amid the sterile salad bars of midtown. An ordinary cardboard container might contain an extraordinary farro, cabbage, and prosciutto soup, or a lentil salad, crunchy with fennel. The other morning, as I sat sipping a macchiato and eating an excellent *maritozzo*—a great pouf of brioche wearing a thick stripe of whipped cream and filled with vanilla custard—a nattily dressed older gentleman on the stool next to me was doing exactly the same. He gestured to the pastry with glee, explaining that it was from Rome, as was he, and set off into the chill with a pep in his step. *(L'Ami Pierre $2.50-$14; Lodi pastries and panini $4-$15.)* ♦

By Lauren Collins

By Patricia Marx

By David Remnick

By Patricia Marx

The Theatre

- **Gender Critique Meets Lewd Spectacle in “The Patient Gloria”**

Gender Critique Meets Lewd Spectacle in “The Patient Gloria”

Gina Moxley’s play examines the sexual and behavioral strictures on women through the lens of psychotherapy circa 1964.

By Vinson Cunningham



The Irish playwright Gina Moxley, a spritely, spirited presence onstage, performs to raucous, cutting effect in “The Patient Gloria,” at St. Ann’s Warehouse (presented in collaboration with the Dublin-based company Pan Pan, and directed by John McIlduff). With a sharp nose, smartly trimmed blond hair, and bright-blue eyes, she has a way of smirking that implicates the audience in her mischievous thought patterns. She speaks in tones of sardonic wonder. It makes sense, then, that the first words of her play are directed toward the crowd, falsely undermining an authority that she loosely carries. “Can you see me?” she asks. Initially, as I watched the show, it wasn’t clear whether we should answer. When we finally did, at first feebly, then gradually getting into it, Moxley kept talking, almost conversationally:

> That any better? Can you see me now? You can? Wow. Yes. Miraculous. You should not be able to see me at all. Seriously, I’ve

> been fading for years and am technically invisible by now. Recently, I got on a completely empty bus, first person on it and then a man got on at the next stop and sat on me, didn't see me at all. That's how invisible I am. Ancient.

Moxley continues to interact with the audience, foretelling the show's ironic, confrontational, often outright pissed-off tone. She's wearing a nicely tailored suit and a pair of chunky, sparkly high-heeled boots. She's also holding a stuffed stocking, tied to look like a sagging penis. It's an indelible stage picture, one I won't forget soon.

Over the course of "The Patient Gloria," the seriousness of Moxley's critique of gender and the cramped and incoherent space into which it forces women—making them sometimes hypervisible and sometimes totally unseen, objects of scrutiny and clinical study instead of whole human beings, glorious in their inconsistency—keeps brushing up against her unerring instinct for lewd, droll, compelling spectacle. That's the pattern which makes this tightly compressed, manically active play work. (It runs only seventy-five minutes, a great mercy in a season that has featured too many overpadded, two-hour-plus crawlers for my taste.)

The play has three strong strands, distinct in content but tonally harmonious. First, as the title implies, it's an investigation—carried out through a digressive critical reënactment—of the infamous psychotherapeutic training film "Three Approaches to Psychotherapy," or, as it came to be called, "The Gloria Films." In 1964, Gloria Szymanski, a recently divorced mother struggling with the sexual and behavioral strictures of her new status, was filmed as a patient of three renowned therapists: Carl Rogers, Frederick Perls, and Albert Ellis. The film was produced and narrated by the psychologist Everett L. Shostrum, who was Szymanski's personal therapist and who recruited her for this starring role. As Moxley—ever the sardonic, sometimes devastating commentator—shares with the audience:

> He told Gloria that the films would only be used in schools and colleges to teach psychology students so imagine her surprise then when making her breakfast pancakes a year or so later to see her interview with Dr. Perls on TV and then she found out that the films were going to be shown in full in movie theatres all over the country.

In Moxley's play—crafted with excruciatingly minute attention to the film, which is still widely available—Liv O'Donoghue takes the role of Gloria. O'Donoghue is very funny, in an easygoing, mostly physical way that contrasts quite well with Moxley's more energetic approach. In O'Donoghue's hands, Gloria is intensely intelligent and guilelessly sexual. She talks, with frankness and charm, about her daddy issues and her pinings for smart, authoritative men. If not for the clinical setting and the disapproving gaze of the therapists, her desires would seem normal—which, of course, they are. As far as we can tell, she feels guilty about her various attractions and flirtations only because of society's external pressures against being both a mother and a sexual being.

It's a tension that keeps coming up: Gloria is visiting these male therapists—guardians and stern definers of what counts as "good behavior" for a woman—only because she can't match their standard, which they set in the first place. They're advertising themselves as the solution to a problem that they helped create. Gloria's desires and the therapists' hang-ups are a snake's mouth and its tail, forming a fucked-up circle of censure and shame. Gloria has her neuroses, but it's clear that her therapists are far worse off. They're all, in one way or another, trying to seduce her, and they all employ deeply sadistic forms of negging—insult as come-on—to make their advances.

Each of the therapists is played by Moxley. Part of the enjoyment of the show is listening to the gruff accents she applies to these men, and how she turns their shaming banter and ultimately phallocentric practices against them, making them buffoonish and gross. She's especially good—terrifying, really—as Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, whose practice centers on body language instead of on words. Or, as he puts it, "I disregard most of the content of what the patient says and concentrate most on the nonverbal level, as this is the only one which is less subject to self-deception." In practical terms, this method allows Perls to turn his session with Gloria into a sexist and condescending episode, scrutinizing and objectifying her bodily tics instead of heeding her verbal pleas for useful help. Moxley makes a meal out of Perls's mocking physical gestures, transforming the session into something like a dance.

The second strand of the play is Moxley speaking as herself, delivering an impressionistic personal essay about how, as a young girl in Ireland, she

ingested chauvinistic messages like the ones that give Gloria the blues. Just as in her opening salvo, about being ignored on the bus, Moxley directly addresses the audience, drifting back in time to her childhood. One of the most interesting fixations of these passages of memory is Moxley's attitude toward God. The punitive enclosure of her Irish Catholic upbringing is constantly referred to. God is a policeman and a judge—or, perhaps, a remote and inscrutable therapist, scribbling on his pad. In any case, Moxley's remembrances of the God of her youth—more precisely, God as he was presented to her in 1964, the year of Gloria's ordeal—sound like torrents of righteous anger:

> This was at a time when manners were more important than anything else. The glory days of domestic violence, drunken driving, child abuse and cockeyed Catholicism. . . . I was damned already. Branded by original sin. Guilty. God, surrounded by cushions, twirling his moustache and pointing from his smug fucking perch up above, picked me out as I walked alone up the path to the door and occasions of sin. He could see through my pink dress and vest to my soul—wherever that was—blackened with ancestral fault.

Passages such as this one reminded me of Lucille Clifton's tart, defiant poem "why some people be mad at me sometimes":

> they ask me to remember
> but they want me to remember
> their memories
> and I keep on remembering mine

Perhaps in defiance of all Gloria's confusions and the memory of her own patriarchy-fuelled pain, Moxley's third strand is music. At one point, she steps on a pedal and an eerie beat starts to play. She and O'Donoghue are joined onstage by the musician Jane Deasy, who performs furious, boisterous songs—one of them is "Shitlist," by the band L7—on a bass guitar.

There's an ethical quandary at the heart of "The Patient Gloria"—the emergence of Szymanski's sessions into the public realm was a monstrous betrayal, the final stroke of a violent sexism that the film's content makes

clear. To take the sessions and re-publicize them through theatre, then, seems fraught. But, by collaging them with memory and cutting through them with music, Moxley has turned pain into a party. By the end, you might be dancing along. ♦

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